

The Urgent Need for Revival Today

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verses 14 to 29, as printed in the liturgy.

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

What are you arguing with them about, he asked. A man in the crowd answered, Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.

Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.

[1 : 1 7] You unbelieving generation, Jesus replied, How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, How long has he been like this? From childhood, he answered. It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.

But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. If you can, said Jesus, everything is possible for one who believes.

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit.

[2 : 1 4] You deaf and mute spirit, he commanded. I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. The spirit shrieked, convulsed violently, and came out.

The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, He's dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, Why couldn't we drive it out?

He replied, This kind can only come out by prayer. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. So, this story is in your pew Bibles.

If you want to open that on page 820, you can see the larger context. It's after the transfiguration where the glory of Jesus as the divine son of God has just been revealed to Peter, James, and John.

And while Jesus is up on top of that mountain with his three disciples, the nine other disciples are down at the bottom of the mountain, and they're wrestling, they're struggling with evil.

[3 : 23] And Jesus comes, and he finds them in an argument, and he says, Well, what are you arguing about? And this man, this father, steps forward, and he says, Well, I'm the cause of all this commotion because, you see, my poor boy, he has been attacked by these convulsions since childhood.

And I thought that you and your disciples could help and could heal my boy. But your people could do nothing. You know, they tried and they failed.

And Jesus proceeds to exercise this demon out of this boy and heals and restores him just in a moment, in an instant. And the disciples asked Jesus to say, Why could we not drive it out?

I mean, we've had ministry success before, but today we failed. Why is that? And Jesus said, Well, because this kind can come out only by prayer.

And Jesus demonstrated that fact, that, you know, Jesus in a moment with extreme ease, he just spoke a word and evil was vanquished and the boy was healed.

[4 : 35] Now, some of you may feel a little nervous at this point, like, Man, we sent our pastor on sabbatical, and he's come out, you know, talking about revival and demons and exorcisms. And maybe that wasn't such a good idea.

Maybe we should send him, you know, away for another four months. And that would be great. That would be fine by me. But hang with me here. I want to explore Jesus' statement that this kind can come out only by prayer.

Jesus says this kind. And I think in many ways in this boy we see a picture of the modern world that is seized and convulsed by evil, an evil that is distorting and destroying the image of God.

And in the disciples we see the church of Christ, they're trying. You know, they're doing their uttermost, but they're lacking in power. They're obviously failing to deal with the situation.

And do any of us ask that question that the disciples ask, like, Lord, why do we have no power to deal with the evil that convulses our world?

[5 : 41] Why does the church seem to lack such spiritual energy and authority to engage with the situation that confronts us? And Jesus answers that question.

Why couldn't we drive out this evil spirit? And his answer is this kind. This kind. You don't understand this kind.

You've not yet learned to differentiate between that kind and this kind. You see, the disciples knew how to deal with that kind of spirit.

After some initial training, our Lord sent his disciples out and he said, I want you to go and preach the gospel of the kingdom of God, and I want you to drive out evil spirits.

And they went and did just that. And in Luke chapter 10, we read that on one occasion they were so successful that they came back with such elation and such excitement, really full of an overconfidence in themselves.

[6 : 43] And the Lord rebuked the pride of his little church of disciples there. And he said to them in Luke 10, 20, he said, Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

You are full of excitement because in my name and in my power, the devils are being made subject to you. And as you go out preaching the kingdom, this kingdom of darkness, this kingdom of all these evil spirits are just falling before you as you preach the gospel.

But this time, this father brings his son for healing, and you approached that problem with confidence and with assurance. And you had no doubt that you were going to succeed.

And yet, in spite of all of your efforts, the boy was no better at all. He's just as desperate, just as miserable as he was before he came to you. And so Jesus is saying, I want to give you eyes so that you can begin to see the difference between that kind that you've encountered before with some success, and this kind, which is far stronger than anything you've ever dealt with before.

You guys tracking with me? Some of you have read Screwtape Letters, and C.S. Lewis got that whole concept of that book from the New Testament, which teaches the difference between devil and devil, right?

[8 : 12] Junior devil, senior devil, weaker devil, stronger devil. That's what Jesus is teaching here, that in this evil kingdom of dark powers, there are gradations and there are hierarchies.

So that in Ephesians chapter 6, the apostle Paul says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood. That if you think, you know, our struggle is against human beings or human groups or human institutions, you've misread, you've misinterpreted the situation.

That our struggle is against something else. Well, what is it that we're wrestling against? The apostle says, we wrestle against principalities and against powers and against rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

You see, there's this gradation, this hierarchy, and at the head of all that is Satan himself, whom the apostle calls in Ephesians 2, the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

And under Satan, Jesus' teaching, is that all of these spirits, all these powers, all of these forces vary in their strength. And you disciples do not yet know what it is that you're up against.

[9 : 31] See, earlier the disciples had been easily able to deal with these lesser spirits and they could master them, they could exercise them. But Jesus says, here is a spirit of greater power, this kind.

It's not like those feeble spirits. It's altogether different. You're facing a much greater problem. The disciples had rushed and attempted treatment before they really understood the nature of the problem.

And I think in the church today, we're so active. And I'm talking about, you know, the church in North America, including Christ Church. But we're so active. We're so busy.

We're devoting massive amounts of time and energy and money without stopping to consider Jesus' diagnosis of this kind. That we may not be aware, as aware as we should be, of the real essence and depth of the problem that's confronting the church.

That we may be carrying on with certain methods which were once successful but which will now fail us because we're in a new situation. In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, he wrote that we must unchain the earth from the sun.

[10 : 52] We must unchain the earth from the sun and find a new center, right? That's what he means by that. And that unchaining the earth from the sun, we should revalue all values.

And the result of this great movement, you know, led by Nietzsche and many others, 140 years later, is that we now live in this late modern post-Christian secular age society that's seized and afflicted and convulsed by this kind of destructive evil and it doesn't even know what's happening.

You know, since Nietzsche's time, belief in God has been rapidly fading. Knowledge of biblical truth has diminished to the point where it's almost virtually gone.

We've lost a sense of the universal, timeless, moral absolutes of right and wrong that pretty much every culture used to acknowledge. Together. The notion that human beings need saving is increasingly dismissed and even mocked as something, just a ridiculous idea.

Jesus is interpreted as just a man among men. He's a political agitator, a social reformer. He's a great ethical teacher and example, but he's nothing more.

[12 : 14] The Bible is interpreted as just a book among books. You know, inspiring stories, beautiful poems, wise sayings, really mostly myth and legend, superstition, nothing much more than that.

And the result of this 150-year experiment in the Western world is that most of our friends and neighbors and colleagues and our family are in positions of plenty.

They're able to get what they want, but they're totally unconcerned about spiritual things. Not interested in the things of the soul. Not interested in the higher and eternal things of life.

Not interested in God at all. And they're just sitting there eating and drinking and enjoying themselves. Completely powerless.

When these headlines come across the news of evil convulsing the world, don't know what to do with it. Completely unprepared to meet God face to face and to stand before the judge of all the earth with his exacting standards of holiness and righteousness.

[13 : 25] Christchurch, we're facing an unprecedented post-Christian context and an increasingly anti-Christian zeitgeist.

And the question is, do we adequately understand the spirit of our age? Because we can't carry on thinking that the problem is that kind when really Jesus is teaching us the problem is this kind.

I haven't preached in a while, so I can't tell if you're with me or not. This kind, Jesus says. He wants us to deal with that.

But he also goes on. He says this kind can come out. This kind can come out. When you looked at all the actors on the scene, you have, number one, the devil who Scripture says is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.

And the disciples pose no threat to him whatsoever. You have this boy who's in this terrible condition of helplessness. Evil is making him more and more subhuman.

[14 : 36] You have the scribes who just argue and debate. Basically, they're the clergy, just useless in the face of confronting real evil. You have this crowd that's in total distress.

I mean, imagine how many other people are waiting in line to be healed and be delivered. You have this father who's distraught and he prays, rescue me from my unbelief.

And you have the disciples who are confident they can help, but then they're mortified by their failure and they're baffled by it. It's a scene of total despair.

And is this not our situation exactly? Satan is rampant. The world is convulsing with evil.

The church is impotent with her squabbling scribes. This crowd of agonizing and endless need is just watching this spectacle helplessly.

[15 : 39] The people of God have a faltering faith that's polluted and choked by unbelief. And the disciples are perplexed about what to do in the face of real evil.

Do you feel desperate? Well, see, that's a good thing because the church has never experienced revival until she's found herself in a state of humble desperation.

When we cry out and say, oh, Lord, help us. Oh, Lord, have mercy on us. And I mentioned six actors in the scene, but actually there's a seventh. And he enters the scene and he says, this kind can come out.

And he shows us his power to drive it out. And then he has this follow-up Q&A; session where he says, this kind cannot be driven out by anything but.

He's saying that there are certain approaches that are utterly useless when applied to this kind. You know, church, you've had power before. Disciples, you've had power before. And that was good.

[16 : 42] But now it's insufficient. It's inadequate. It's going to be ineffective. It's going to leave you, disciples, just helpless and hopeless. It's going to leave this boy just diseased and powerless.

Jesus is driving his disciples to a deeper dependency and a deeper sense of desperation for him. I mean, what do the disciples do when they realize that in spite of their efforts, that they are not enough?

That they're useless? That they lack the power that they need to confront the powers and principalities of this world? What does the church do today when she realizes that she's not touching the secular age at all?

That the spiritual and moral condition of our society is not being helped by us one bit. In fact, in many ways, we're just reflecting the spiritual and moral condition of the society back to itself and making things worse.

Jesus says, in this situation, I want you to put your faith in my power to deal with this kind.

[17 : 56] Look at verse 19. He says, you unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me. He looks at all the actors on the stage. He says, there's no faith here.

I'm the only one who has faith. Verse 20. So they brought him, and when the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion, and he fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

See, the spirits know Jesus. The spirits know his power, and when they see him approaching, they resist, and they tighten their grip. Verse 21.

Jesus asked the boy's father, how long has he been like this? From childhood, he answered. It has often thrown him into fire and water to kill him, but if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.

I see this father just shrugging his shoulders and saying, you know, your people have been helpless. If there's anything you think you might possibly be able to manage, go for it.

[18 : 54] And Jesus, I think, teasingly rebukes him in verse 23, and he bounces the question right back. He says, what's this if you can nonsense? The issue here is not my ability.

The issue is you, all of you people, putting a limit on God for whom everything is possible. And this man hears that word.

In verse 24, it says, And that's the prayer for revival, right?

It's praying, Lord, enliven the lukewarm among us. Quicken the sleeping among us. Awaken the lethargic among us.

Come, Lord, revive us and help us. And Jesus responds to that prayer in verse 25. When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit.

[20 : 09] You deaf and mute spirit, he said, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. And the spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out.

And the boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, he's dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet. And he stood up. This is Jesus on the way to his own death and resurrection.

And he takes this boy out of death, dealing evil, and he raises him up to new life. Jesus' might and Jesus' majesty is most visibly displayed when we've exhausted all human resources.

Right? And he comes in as the life giver, the giver of life who breaks Satan's power. And he puts this boy back together again.

He releases him through the power of his authoritative word. And the question for us today is, have you experienced this yourself?

[21 : 16] Have you experienced Jesus taking you by the hand, as it were, and saving you? Raising you up from darkness and evil and sin and death and giving you new life?

Has Jesus come to you and has he unleashed the power of the Holy Spirit in you and delivered you from this kingdom of darkness and into his kingdom of light?

Because you cannot become a Christian. You cannot enter the kingdom of God in any other way. And if you're a Christian, it's only because this one who's gone through death and come out the other side has come searching for you.

And he's found you and he's grabbed you by the hand and he's raised you up to new life. And that's why some of us are here today.

Because Jesus came and he raised us up from addiction and abuse and abandonment. That Jesus came and he found us and he raised us up from greedy desires for more prosperity.

[22 : 23] And a prideful quest for more power and lustful cravings for more pleasure. He set us up on our feet again. Right? He came and he found us and he raised us up from this demonic pull of self-centeredness and self-interest and self-indulgence.

And he gave us a new life. And if Jesus has taken you by the hand and he's given you life and he's lifted you to your feet, give him thanks today.

And if you've not yet experienced that power to save, but you want to, or you want to want to, then I encourage you just to take the risk and to pray, Lord, I kind of believe.

Come and rescue me from my unbelief. Because Jesus says this kind, it can come out. This kind can come out.

But Jesus says it can come out only by prayer. And again, I'm out of preaching shape, so it's hard to preach short sermons when you haven't preached in a while. I've got one more point, but really it's Jesus' fault because it's his point.

[23 : 39] He says it can come out only by prayer. And I want to just say a final word here about prayer. He says you succeeded before because you were dealing with that kind of lesser and weaker spirits.

But you failed here with this kind because you didn't have the sufficient power. And the reason you didn't have sufficient power is because you were ignorant of these hierarchies and gradations of power that you're up against.

And therefore, you lacked the preparation you needed. You lacked the faith-filled prayers that you needed. And therefore, you failed. But I did what you could not do because I have the power.

Because I'm filled with the power of God that he gives me by the Holy Spirit. And that's what Jesus has been doing up on the Mount of Transfiguration. He's been praying to his Father, Please, Father, fill me with your Holy Spirit for the things that I need to go do now.

For the things that you've given me to do. Fill me with your Spirit of power. And Jesus comes back from this particularly intense time of prayer with heightened power.

[24 : 47] And he says, You disciples, you'll never be able to deal with this kind unless you've applied to God for the power which he alone can give you.

Presumably, they had been praying, right? They didn't try to do something here without praying. But Jesus is calling them to deeper prayer. To a deeper awareness of their need and their impotence and their helplessness and their desperate dependency on the Lord.

To say, We are in over our heads. We're confronting something that's too deep for us to deal with. Jesus says, I'm calling you to special prayer.

I'm calling you to a focused spiritual effort where you say, Lord, we need something that can go down beneath this evil power. That can shatter it.

The only thing that can really do that, Lord, is your extraordinary and supernatural power. Because you are the almighty God. And on my sabbatical, I just sensed the Lord inviting me to pray in new ways.

[25 : 56] To enter into a new season of prayer. And I guess if he's inviting me, I presume he's inviting you too. To disrupt the status quo. And to give our time, give our energy, give our focused attention to prayer for the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit among us.

A prayer that's desperate that says, Lord, we cannot accomplish the great mission that you've given us as a church here if we don't have the authority and the might and the strength and the power of the Spirit.

And if we're utterly convinced of our need for this, we will, I will cease to have much confidence in ourselves. Right? In our methods and the things that we've accomplished in the past.

Friends, do you want to be full of the power of God's Spirit? And do you believe that God can fill you like he filled Jesus with the Holy Spirit?

We need this power that can enter the souls of people and break the grip of evil to liberate them and to make them new. And that's the power of the living God.

[27 : 09] And God's been doing that. You know, he did it 118 years ago in Wales, in Korea, in India. He did it, you know, 165 years ago in New York City.

And as I read more and more about these times where God answered the prayers of his people, I think, you know, we should seek it. We should plead for it. We should yearn for it with more intense prayer.

What do you think? You're willing to join me in this concern for revival? Willing to pray with me for the power of God to fill not just our church, but his church everywhere?

Many of the ancient manuscripts say that this kind can only come out by prayer and fasting. Maybe God's calling you to fast from food, from entertainment, from technology, from, you know, those lesser things that drain away our time.

On things that don't really matter. To give our undivided attention to prayer. Because we'll never deal with the problems facing the church unless the whole church.

[28 : 20] Not just, you know, a couple people in the church. But the whole church is concentrating its attention in prayer and waiting on God and saying, God, fill us with your power. Maybe tonight you'll begin on your knees beside your bed before you go to sleep.

Maybe you'll get up and roll out of bed and you'll fall on your face. And enter into that place of prayer where Jesus says, our Father who is unseen is seeing what's done in secret.

Maybe as you gather, as our community groups launch, you'd spend more time praying like this. And maybe, you know, as we come together next week at 9.30 Sunday morning in our boiler room where we pray that we had about six people, seven people in there.

And there were a few more seats. You know, maybe you'd come and fill those seats and come pray that God would do great things here when we gather. That, you know, as we launch Wonderful Wednesdays, we're setting aside second Wednesdays to come as a church.

All of you are invited to come to even song and prayer. We'll just sing hymns and we'll pray in the way that Jesus is calling us to pray. Because there's really no hope of dealing with this kind unless God manifests His power.

[29 : 40] But when He does manifest His power, it's like this boy. You know, Jesus just overcomes evil with apparent ease.

And He deals with this problem in an effortless manner. The devil's exercised. The boy is healed. The father's relieved. The family's restored.

The community rejoices. May it be so among us. Because Christ is risen. And our risen and living Lord is waiting for us to pray that He would do this again.

And so may we come to terms with our own powerlessness in the face of evil. May we come to know the power of God in Jesus by the Spirit. And might we seek more and more to be full of the Holy Spirit.

Full of His power through prayer. And as we pray, let us pray with confidence that as Jesus says, everything is possible for those who believe.

[30 : 40] Let us pray deeply believing that nothing is impossible for God. And let us pray knowing that the eternal, the infinite, the unlimited power of God is there for the asking.

If only we would radically humble ourselves and rely on His ability and His alone. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen.