

Combating Unbelief

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[0:00] This morning, I think part of that is that there are many of us who are sick. So please be in prayer for your brothers and sisters that you don't see it.

And some are also traveling. But most, I know that I have news of at least four or five people who have fallen ill. And that's the nature of the changing season.

So take your vitamin C, drink your water, and let's pray for one another. For good health. But our gospel reading this morning is from Mark 9, verse 14 to 29.

It's page 103, 104, 105 of your Pew Bible, I think. Someone finds it. I actually don't know. I didn't write it down this morning.

1004, thank you. Page 1004 of your Pew Bible. I invite you to open along and follow along. We're still in Mark's gospel.

[1:02] And where are we now in Mark's gospel? Remember that last week we were in chapter 7. The healing of the deaf, mute man. Jesus spat and touched him and healed him.

That's the story. This is one of the things that, the advantage of preaching through the whole book rather than jumping, is that we've missed now in chapter 8 a very pivotal part of the gospel of Mark. The confession of Apostle Peter about who Jesus is. So that's where we are in Mark. Chapter 7 has happened. Chapter 8, Jesus asked his disciples, Who do people say I am?

And Peter confessed rightly that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah of God. And then after that, Mark takes us to the transfiguration.

Well, before that, Peter confesses, and then Peter is rebuked. It's a whiplash for poor Peter. Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, and immediately Jesus tells them what's about to happen.

[2:18] And when the second half of Mark here, this is what I'm trying to tell us, chapter 7 is the end of the first half of the gospel of Mark.

We're now beginning in the end of chapter 8, the confession on, when the second part of the gospel of Mark, and there is less miracles, more teaching in this second half of it.

But what does Jesus now begin to tell his disciples after Peter's confession? For those of you who went through the Bible study, in Wednesday night Bible study through Mark, you will know this, right?

Peter confesses, and then Jesus starts to tell his disciples, I'm going to Jerusalem to conquer the Romans, and to put everything right, and to restore the glory and greatness of Solomon.

Is that what he said to them? No. He says, I'm going to Jerusalem. That's what they wanted him to say. But he says, I'm going to Jerusalem to die. The Son of Man will be killed.

[3:22] And that's where Peter gets rebuked, because Peter heard it, and he spoke for the rest of them. It wasn't just Peter. Rebuke. He says, do not say that, Jesus. And Jesus says to him, get behind me, Satan.

So that's where we are in Mark. It's post that. And after that rebuke, Jesus now shows three of them, Peter, James, and John, takes them up on the hill, on the mountain of transfiguration.

There they saw Jesus transfigured before them. And they saw Elijah, and they saw Moses with him. And they beheld the Son's glory unveiled before their eyes.

They cower in worship before him, rightly so. And then they descended down the mountain. And as they descent down the mountain, Jesus again tells them not to tell anyone about what they've just witnessed.

And then he also reminded them what he's about to do. That he's going to Jerusalem to die. Here now we see in the Gospel of Mark an encroaching unbelief.

[4:29] We've already seen it through the Gospel of Mark. But we see it again here. This is an encroaching unbelief. We don't understand. We want to believe you, Jesus. But we don't quite get

what you're saying.

We want to believe what you're saying. But you're not making sense to our ears. And the Gospel reading we have this morning is situated in that sort of context of confession, rebuke, transfiguration, now descent down back to the mountain, and Jesus is nowhere to be found at the beginning of this story that we read in our Gospel reading.

When they came and we see that there's a story of a father and of a son who's demon-possessed and demon being tortured by demonic power.

It's a very pitiable scene that we have in our Gospel reading this morning. And we see that the disciples' attempt at healing this boy and their failure at it and Jesus' success and then is continuing teaching through the miracles.

So, in verse 14 to 29, we see really primarily one of these primary things is a call to dependent discipleship.

[5:54] A call to dependent discipleship. So, let me read from verse 14. When the disciples, when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them and scribes arguing with them.

And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, that is, Jesus comes. Jesus is actually the one coming on the scene now, as it were. We're seeing it from his viewpoint. Right? There's a great crowd around the disciples and what are they doing with the disciples?

Arguing with them, with the disciples. The disciples arguing with the crowd. The crowd arguing with the disciples. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw Jesus, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him.

And he asked them, why are you arguing with them? That is, why are you arguing with each other? And someone from the crowd tells the reason. Teacher, I brought my son to you for he has a spirit that makes him mute.

This is a significant story in Mark's gospel. This healing story. It marks, it marks for us in many ways, reveals in many ways the ongoing turmoil in the heart of the disciples and their ongoing unbelief.

[7:04] And so they come to Jesus and the father comes to Jesus. Your disciples couldn't do anything. I brought my son who was tortured, who has a spirit that makes him mute.

In verse 18, and whenever it seizes him, the father says, it throws him down and he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out and they were not able to.

Right. So you read that picture of what's going on with this young boy and maybe your mother hears you're saying, these pitiful, primitive people, don't they know this is epilepsy?

Right. If you know anyone who suffers from epilepsy, this is a description of what happens when you have seizures. You grind your teeth, you become rigid. This is not demon possession, this is epilepsy.

These people don't know anything. They don't have science. Well, I will ask you to caution yourself when you read that because there is a distinction that Mark is making and we see it in this gospel account that there is actually seemingly medical condition.

[8:19] But there is also the effects and the bondage of the devil. The devil is a work. And that's how the devil often works, isn't it?

The devil often uses our weaknesses to oppress us. So, perhaps this young boy does have what is epilepsy. Maybe he had it as a medical condition to begin with.

Maybe it was actually, it came upon him because the devil's, the devil's possession of him. But whatever it is, we see here that there is actually a demon possessed.

And Mark is quite careful when in his gospel to make a distinction between sickness and demon possession. If you read through the gospel of Mark, he makes distinctions between the two. So, he's not confusing the categories here.

He knows to make the distinction, but he's saying there is, this boy is demon possessed. And what happens to the boy? When it comes on, the spirit, the demonic spirit comes upon him, it seizes him, it throws him down, it grinds his teeth and becomes rigid.

[9:25] So, I asked your disciples to cast him out and they were not able to. At this point, you might say, well, that seems hard if you've been reading through Mark.

If you go to chapter 3, verse 15, Jesus has previously given power to his disciples when he sent them out and he gave them power to cast out demons and to heal the sick and to preach the

gospel.

But here, it seems that all of a sudden, they don't have that same power that he had given them in chapter 3 of Mark. We'll get to that later. Jesus, seeing the response of the Father, though, says this, O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?

How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me. Here is the good shepherd, the great physician, upon seeing this boy in his state, moved with pity, has them to bring the boy to him.

But Jesus doesn't only do that. He also has a rebuke of faithless generations. Because what's in view is the contrast between the faithlessness of the disciples and the crowd who are unable to heal the boy with what we will come to see now, a growing belief of the boy's father.

[10 : 49] There's a contrast that Mark wants us to see here in this gospel. The disciples, along with unbelieving Israel, are the faithless generation. The disciples in particular, they've seen the power of God, they've beheld him, they've seen what Christ Jesus has done throughout his ministries, they've heard his word, but they are yet still faithless.

They are a faithless generation. Why are they faithless? Is it because they didn't see God do the works that he did? They saw it. They're eyewitnesses to it. What is it that is making them not trust fully in Jesus?

Perhaps it's part of the reason what Jesus has been telling them, that he is going to die in Jerusalem, and what he's calling them to do as well, that they themselves must also come and die if they are to follow him.

This is a hard saying for the disciples. I'm going to Jerusalem to die. You who are following me must also come and die. Carry your cross. And we hear that word, and it probably rolls off our tongues and rolls off our mind.

We don't understand the enormity of it to carry your cross and follow Jesus. It's like someone saying it to us today. Put a loop around your neck and follow Jesus. The cross is a sign of capital punishment.

[12 : 20] The worst sign. Someone says, strap an electric chair on your back and follow Jesus. That's what Jesus is saying to them. So the shock of it is that, what do you mean? We want to follow you to glory.

And you're telling us that the way to glory is through suffering. You will suffer and we must follow you in suffering. It's hard for us to grasp this. And so that's where the disciples are.

And this is why Jesus says, you faithless generation. But Jesus doesn't just end there. In verse 20, he goes on to investigate the matter with this particular father. It's like a doctor's visit.

When you go to the doctor, you have symptoms. But what does the doctor do? He doesn't only observe your symptoms because he actually observes what's going on. At the very instance when the spirit saw Jesus, the effect started taking place.

The boy went into seizure. He was being tormented. But not only that, Jesus not only observes the symptoms, but he asks probing questions. He's the great physician after all.

[13 : 25] And so, he asked the boy's father when they brought the, well, reading from verse 20, the spirit saw him and immediately the boy became convulsed. The boy fell to the ground, foamed at the mouth, became rigid.

And so Jesus asked the father, verse 21, how long has this been happening to him? And here was what the father says from childhood. And here's what the father says too.

It has often cast him into fire and into water to destroy him. But if you can do anything, if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.

Well, here's the clear evidence of demon possession. Because not only is the boy going through sort of what it seems in our modern years, epileptic symptoms, seizures, but not only that, the spirit is driving him into fire or into water if there's nearby.

To what end? To destroy him. That's what the devil does. Sometimes it doesn't come in menacing visage like he does with this boy.

[14 : 34] Sometimes it comes in sort of pleasing words, sweet words, pleasures of the world. But it's, the devil comes in all manners.

But when he comes, he only comes to do one thing, to kill and to destroy. He is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. We must know this about the devil.

We must always be aware of it. Because the devil is only about one thing, seeking the death of the children of God. And that's what he's doing with this boy.

Seeking to destroy him. Seeking to cast him into fire, to cast him into water, to destroy him. Can you imagine the anxiousness, the unending worry this will have been to this boy's family?

Constantly unwatched. Constantly afraid. Constantly on the knife's edge, as it were. And so when you hear the plea of this father, if you can do anything, have compassion.

[15:48] Have compassion on us and help us. This is a cry for mercy. It's a cry for help. But Jesus responds this way, in verse 23.

And Jesus said to him, if you can, and Jesus says to him, all things are possible for anyone who believes. Right?

Why would Jesus respond? Why wouldn't Jesus just respond in healing the man? But Jesus is trying to both teach and draw out the man's faith in opposition and contrast to the disciples and the rest of the crowd's faith.

And as we saw last week, it's not only a miracle, but it's also a teaching instrument for us and for the disciples first, and for us as well as we observe it.

So Jesus says to the man, if you can, what do you mean if you can? All things are possible for anyone who believes. And here's the thing. I think we should pause in verse 23 for a second and understand what Jesus is saying here in verse 23.

[17:02] Because oftentimes, you've read that, I'm sure, and you've heard people preach on that or speak on that verse in a very damaging way.

All things are possible for anyone who believes. All you have to do is just have faith. And so if it doesn't happen, it's because you don't have faith. It is all dependent on you and your ability to believe, to muster up within yourself faith and believe.

And if what you're asking for when you're pleading to God for it doesn't come to pass, it's your fault. It's your lack of faith. Because all things are possible for anyone who believes, after all.

And you must not believe. That's not what Jesus is saying here. When you hear people say that or preach or misinterpret this verse, be assured that that is not what Jesus is saying.

Look on to the next verse in verse 24. If you can, Jesus says in verse 23, all things are possible for anyone who believes. and then Jesus says to, and then immediately the father of the child.

[18:10] What is his response? When you hear that, when you hear that from Jesus' lips, all things are possible for anyone who believes. What is the father's response?

He says, he cries out actually. Not only just says, he cries out. You can see the desperation of this man. He cries out to the Lord and said, I believe.

Help my unbelief. Well here, brothers and sisters, should be the cry of our heart constantly before God. It isn't, I need to gin up faith.

I need to muster my faith. I need to create more faith in myself. God, it's not to beat up on ourselves. It's not to listen to those who want to beat up on you for your seeming lack of faith.

But it rather to come to the Lord as his father does and cry out. I do believe, but my faith is faulting.

[19:18] Help. Help my unbelief. The cry of help here in the Greek is to run towards. To run towards someone who is in distress.

That's what the father is asking. Come. Help me. Run towards me in my distress and desperation. Help my unbelief. That should be the cry of our hearts to the Lord.

The father, this father, in contrast with the disciples, is moving from unbelief unbelief to a place of simple dependence on Jesus.

And that's what God calls us to. A place of simple dependence. That's what he wants his disciples, the place he wants his disciples to be. So Jesus hears this cry of help from the father.

And when Jesus saw that the crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit before them. And saying to the unclean spirit, you mute and deaf spirit.

[20:24] That's interesting. If you keep in mind last week, we were looking at the miracle of a mute and deaf man. Here is now a mute and deaf spirit.

And we've already saw earlier in this gospel account that what does the spirit do? It makes the boy mute. The boy couldn't talk. The boy is mute. He only foams in the mouth and grimace.

And so Jesus says to the spirit, the demon in the boy, you mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.

And after crying out and convulsing him. Right? So if you're there when Jesus says this, you're seeing the spirit cry.

It's like, it's an exorcism. It's what it is. The spirit cries out and convulsed the boy terribly, Mark tells us. And it came out of him. It came out of him.

[21 : 24] But what's wrong? The boy is lying there like a corpse. So that most of them said, he is dead. What does it look like at this point?

It looks like the demonic spirit has succeeded in what he wants to do, which is to destroy, to kill, to devour, to kill this boy.

The boy lies as a corpse. He is dead, many of them are saying. But what does Jesus do? Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up and he arose.

It's like a resurrection from death to life. Jesus brings the boy. Does that sound familiar to you?

It should be. Because if you are in Christ, that is your story as it is mine. You were dead. You were in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

[22 : 34] Dead. That's what Paul says in Ephesians. But God made you alive in Christ. He took you by the hand and lifted you up and you arose into new life in Christ.

That's the picture here. This is what faith in Christ brings. New life. New life.

Freedom from sin and death and bondage and bondage to the works of the enemy, of the devil.

Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up and he arose.

Jesus heals this boy, delivers him back to his father, whole, free, at liberty. Has Jesus done that for you?

Has Jesus set you free? Have you come to him? Trust in him? Put your faith in him? Simply dependent on him.

[23 : 40] So, Jesus is using this miracle as a parable for us. That this is what it means to come to Jesus. It is to come in simple dependence as his father has come to Jesus.

Saying, I believe, help my home believe. And in the last two verses, we're given a deeper picture into what's just happened. because after the crowd dissipated, the father and his son has left.

When they had entered the house, that is day, Jesus and his disciples, his disciples asked him privately, why could we not cast it out?

After all, we're your disciples. We've been following you. And last time you told us, you give us power to do it, we did it. What's going on? Jesus, why?

And Jesus' response is this, this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer. What the logic of verse 28, I think is this, it's this, the risen Jesus alone can destroy the works of the devil.

[24 : 51] The risen Jesus alone can destroy the works of the devil. The power to deliver from the forces of darkness is not inherent in the disciples. They don't have that power.

It is only granted by the risen Lord Jesus. And here's a warning for us, because in our world we know many who claim to be miracle workers, the Benny Hinn of the world, who have a great following and says, I have the power.

God has given me the power to heal. And people follow them as if the power to heal is inherent in them, as if they are the great man, the great person, the great man of God, as it were.

But here's Jesus saying to all of us, not just to the disciples, power to destroy the works of the devil is not inherent in any of us.

It only resides in God alone. And those who trust in God's power, that is, will trust in God's power and think to themselves that that power that they're trusting, which is God's power, they imagine that that power is under their control.

[26 : 05] They can control it. Someone like Benny Hinn will say it is God's power. They will say that. But they will then seek it is, I am the great man.

God has given me this power. It's under my control. It's at my own disposal. to use as I see fit.

Those who claim that are actually, as this story tells us, are like the disciples.

They're in unbelief. Why? Because they are falsely thinking that the power belongs to them. And they can just use it at their own disposal. Here's a good question that you should ask yourself when people come along and say, I have the gift of healing.

I should qualify that to say Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is still at work healing the sick, setting a liberty, those who are possessed by demons, bringing people from death to life.

God is powerful even now to do those things. But here's the falsehood that comes along with those who claim that. Jesus is the risen Christ, has power to do all of those things, but many claim that that power is at their disposal to use.

[27:23] Well, if Benny Hinn is so powerful, why doesn't he just go to every hospital in the world and start healing the sick, all these other miracle workers? do not be fooled, brothers and sisters.

Do not place your hope in those who claim to that power. Believe, as Jesus wants us to see here, that power resides in him alone. He alone has the power.

Does that power add at our disposal? Does he give us, does he heal, does he set free, does he set a liberty? Yes, he does. And he's still in the business of doing that.

But what are the means by which that is done? Jesus says it in verse 29. This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.

And prayer here means dependence on God. That's what Jesus means by prayer. Dependence on God. Jesus is saying here, the means by which you overcome the works of the devil is by simple utter dependence on me and nothing else.

[28:38] The necessity of total dependence, that's what's necessary. When Jesus says in verse 23, all things are possible for the one who believes. And then he says in verse 29, this kind cannot be driven out by anything of a prayer.

He's saying, all things are possible for those who are utterly dependent on me. It is not the size of your faith. You don't have to worry about ginning up the great faith.

It is the object of your faith. Here is a father who has a fault in faith, who is in desperate need of Jesus to come to his head, but still could not muster up enough.

And what did he do? He cried out to God in his weak faith, and he cried out to the one who alone can set him free.

And here is what Jesus is saying to us and his disciples, you must also likewise depend on me. Simple dependence. And one of the ways in which that simple dependence is played out is in radical self-denial.

[29:51] And so what he's been telling the disciples, that's the story that led on to this story, when he tells them, you must also bear your cross to follow me. Radical self-denial. And secondly, prayerful dependence.

So the question to us, brothers and sisters in Christ is this, are we living a life of self-denial? Are we prayerfully dependent on God?

And even as you lead that life of self-denial, here's a pastoral word to you, brothers and sisters, you know in your own heart, you know the weakness of your own flesh, you know that as you're living and trying and striving to follow Jesus, you are faltering often.

You are not perfect in that walk. You have this body of flesh susceptible to sin and the devil and the world and the temptations all around you.

but when you falter, where do you go? Do you go back to Jesus? Or do you, like the disciples, try to muster up the power in yourself?

[31:00] Or do you go like this father and say, I believe, Jesus, I do believe in you. Help my unbelief. do you do that in prayer for dependence?

This is why prayer is important. This is why prayer is an essential part of our life both individually and as a people of God. Because it tells us and it tells God and it tells the world out there when we're people of prayer that we know and it tells us ourselves that we know that the power does not reside in us.

That the strength, the enablement, the ability is not in us. It is in God alone. And so we need to cry out to him to help us. So, brothers and sisters, I want to encourage you.

This is one of the reasons why we've started in this fall to prioritize prayer. Do we want to see God work among us? Do we want to see the church grow? Do we want to see people set a liberty from all sorts of bondage and chronic illness, bondage to addiction, bondage to sin?

Do we want to increasingly see more people come into the family of God, being raised from the dead into new life? How do we see that? By living a life of self-denial and following Jesus.

[32:28] It's not about me, it's not about you, it's about the gospel of Jesus Christ, making him known, and by prayerful, sinful dependence. As I say all of this to you, I close with this, this passage has been like a two-by-four to me personally this week as I prepare it.

It's whacking me, because it reveals to me my deficiency. You guys, some of you, she's not here this week, I pray for her, it's difficult for her to come because she has a young child and an unbelieving husband, but pray for her so that she can continue to come on Sundays, but you've met the young lady who just joined us, who came to faith, out of the blue.

She just says, I started reading my Bible, and I came to know Jesus, and I want to be baptized. When I first read that email, I was cynical, and then my cynicism went to, I don't know if this is true, how often does this happen?

and then to try to poke holes at the story, and the Holy Spirit has been working in me. Part of the reason is that I have had this sort of plausibility structure, that it's as if the gospel, I am a minister of the gospel, but do I know, do I believe in the power of the gospel to do what Jesus says the gospel does?

that upon hearing, and this is why the mute and deafness thing is important, upon hearing, that's what we should be praying for as we pray, that God will open the ears of people to hear aright the gospel message, that God will open our ears to hear aright.

[34 : 22] Do we believe that upon hearing God's word, God is powerful enough to use that word to bring people from there to life? I am being, as it were, hit upside the head by God the Holy Spirit to remind me that yes, he is still at work in doing that very thing he said he will through his word.

And I invite you also, brothers and sisters, to trust in the risen Lord that he's still at work. God the God will work in bringing the dead to life.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We ask, Lord, we confess that we believe, or we confess that our faith is sometimes faltering, and we ask that you will help us. Help us in our unbelief. Help us to come to you with it. Help us to rest in you as the object of our faith. Help us to walk in simple dependence on you and your words of promise to us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.