

“Everything Is Possible for Him Who Believes”

The Twenty-Eighth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 9:14-32; Isaiah 63:7-19

Now that we've entered the second half of Mark's Gospel, the focus of Jesus' messianic mission will change dramatically. While the first half of Mark was filled with accounts of various miracles, the number of miracles performed by Jesus declines greatly in the second half of this gospel. While the miracles performed earlier in Jesus' ministry were intended to demonstrate Jesus' power over sickness, disease, and the forces of Satan, our Lord's miracles were essentially signs that the kingdom of God had come in power. But the less-frequent miracles in the second half of Mark are primarily intended to prepare Jesus' disciples for what is yet to come. Now that the disciples have confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus must prepare them for his coming death and resurrection. Obviously, there is still much for them to learn.

As continue our series on the Gospel of Mark, we turn to the material in Mark 9, in which Jesus is continuing to teach his disciples about the nature and character of true discipleship. As we have seen, the dramatic turning point in Mark is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (Mark 8:27-30). This confession of faith is followed by Jesus turning his primary attention to teaching the twelve about the cost of discipleship. Once the disciples believe that Jesus is the Messiah who has come to save them from their sin, Jesus must inform them of how this salvation will come about. This is why Jesus begins to speak openly about his impending death and resurrection.

As part of this preparation for the inevitable conflict with the religious authorities in Jerusalem which will lead to Jesus' rejection and crucifixion, Jesus tells all those following him that those who are truly his disciples must be willing to deny themselves, take up their own cross, and follow Jesus wherever he takes them. When Jesus asks us to deny ourselves, he means that we must renounce all confidence in our own righteousness and good works. Instead, we must believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God who has come to save us from our sins. Jesus will provide us with all that is needed for sinners to stand before God on the day of judgment. Jesus' way is the way of the cross and all of his disciples must follow in his steps. All those who follow Jesus must realize that since the world hates Jesus, the world will likewise hate those who follow Jesus as well. This is important for the twelve to understand, since Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees and teachers of the law will only grow more intense and the scorn which will be fall upon Jesus, will fall upon them as well.

Jesus also begins to correct the erroneous assumption on the part of the disciples who believe that when the Messiah came, he would immediately return the nation of Israel to its former greatness. In the minds of most Jews, this meant the defeat of Rome and the establishment of a royal throne in Jerusalem. Thus, throughout this section of Mark, Jesus instructs the disciples that although he did indeed come to bring messianic glory, that glory would not only take a form much different than they expected, but that glory would not come until after the cross and the empty tomb. According to Jesus, the messianic glory which they were expecting would be revealed in stages. Three of them would be given a glimpse of this glory up on the Mount of Transfiguration. All twelve disciples will see this glory in Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. But the full revelation of messianic glory will not be manifest until the last day when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new.

Recall that last time, we saw that after Jesus made the statement recorded in Mark 9:1—“*I tell you the*

truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power”—the disciples were still under the mistaken impression that since Jesus was the Messiah, messianic glory was at hand. And so six days after telling them his glory would be revealed when the kingdom came in power, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain where Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes. The three men clearly understood that Jesus was the New Moses who would lead his people in a New Exodus. No doubt, they made this connection so quickly and easily, because the entire scene as described by Mark was a mirror image of the account of Moses climbing up Mount Sinai as recorded in Exodus 24 where the glory of God was revealed.

What the disciples fail to grasp was that what they had just witnessed was only a brief and faint glimpse of the glory which Jesus possessed from all eternity and which had been veiled by human flesh in his incarnation. What Peter, James, and John saw on the Mount of Transfiguration was not the full revelation of messianic glory. Nor was this the time of Israel’s final restoration. This was but a mere hint of Christ’s glory yet to come. When they saw Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah, it was absolutely clear that Jesus was not only greater than either Moses and Elijah, but that Moses and Elijah, and therefore the whole of the Old Testament, bore witness to Jesus. This confirmed that Jesus was Israel’s final prophet, priest, and king.

And yet, what the three disciples witnessed up on the mount also raised many difficult and perplexing questions. When the cloud vanished—the cloud both revealed God’s glory, while at the same time shielded the three men from the holiness of God—it was clear that the moment was fleeting. When they heard YHWH renew Christ’s messianic mission—“this is my son, listen to him”—Peter, James, and John should have known that Christ’s messianic glory was yet to come. But they were still thoroughly confused. As they walked down the mountain, it was clear to Jesus that the disciples still did not understand, which is why Jesus told them not to talk about what they had heard.

Later on, we learn that the disciples mustered up the courage and asked Jesus about something they heard the Rabbis teach—Elijah must come before the Messiah. Jesus told them that the Rabbis were correct—they were right to believe that Elijah must come first. But Jesus went on to tell them that he must endure the suffering predicted of Messiah in the Old Testament—the very thing they were having so much trouble understanding. Since Elijah comes first, this meant that John the Baptist was Elijah. And since John was the Elijah to come, Jesus must soon suffer at the hands of those who did what they wanted to John. And this is where the disciples continue to be confused. Why must Jesus suffer if he is the Messiah? What is all of this talk of a resurrection?

What follows in Mark 9:14-32, occurred shortly after the group came down the mountain. The disciples have come to understand that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. So far, so good. But what they don’t understand is how Jesus’ death and resurrection fit with that new understanding. Jesus will teach them another important lesson about the nature and character of discipleship, this one having to do with faith and prayer. Jesus will speak yet again of his rejection, death, and resurrection.

The incident which follows is, no doubt, an eyewitness recollection—it most certainly comes directly from Peter since the scene is not recounted in near as much detail in either Matthew (17:14-21) or in Luke (9:37-43a). It is also important to notice that this section of Mark speaks of the disciples’ embarrassing failure to cast out a demon due to their own lack of faith and understanding—hardly the kind of thing you

would make up, if, as critical scholars claim, texts like this are more a legend than fact.¹

The scene as described by Mark takes place at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, somewhere near the city of Caesarea Philippi. There is an intense dispute going on between the remaining disciples and the teachers of the law, a dispute so intense that Jesus, Peter, James, and John approach unnoticed because people are so engrossed in listening to the argument. As we read in verse 14, “*When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.*” The mention of the “teachers of the law” (scribes), is likely an indication that these men were either members of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, or else they were reporting directly to them. They were obviously in the area to check up on Jesus and to gather evidence against him. While they were sniffing around to gather dirt on Jesus, they encountered the nine disciples who remained behind when Jesus, Peter, James, and John had gone up the mountain. And they caught them at a bad time.

In the middle of the dispute, Jesus returns unexpectedly. Marks tell us that “*as soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.*” Since the argument was about Jesus, everyone present was amazed when Jesus suddenly walked up. As is common throughout the gospels, whenever we read that people were amazed or frightened, this is often tied to the giving of significant new revelation. In this case, that one who has just been confessed as Messiah, who has spoken of his coming death and resurrection, who has revealed his glory, was seen with Moses and Elijah, and who was then confirmed in his person and work by YHWH himself, walks up to a group of people heatedly arguing about *his* identity. Mark’s point is that people were amazed because of who Jesus is. His very presence provokes a reaction.² People see Jesus, no longer care about listening to the argument, and they run to greet him.

In verse 16, Jesus directs a question (probably) to the teachers of the law, who were trying to embarrass the disciples in Jesus’ absence.³ Jesus simply asks them, “*What are you arguing with them about?*” But before the scribes could answer him, we learn in verse 17 that someone else interjected. “*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.’*” Here is the case of a desperate man who had brought his demon-possessed child to Jesus, only to find that Jesus was away—up on the mountain. The remaining nine disciples quickly demonstrate that they were no match for the demon. They were unable to cast the demon out, and were of no help whatsoever to this poor man or his child. The teachers of the law, always looking for some misstep on the part of Jesus or his disciples, witnessed this inability to deal with the demon and were using the embarrassing occasion to confront Jesus’ disciples when a crowd then gathered.

From the symptoms which Mark describes, a number of critical scholars have concluded that the boy had *grand mal* epilepsy and these poor ancients simply confused epilepsy with demon possession. While the boy was seriously ill with severe convulsions, Mark indicates that the reason why the boy could not

¹ See the discussions in: Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 299-300; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 329-330; and France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 360-363.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 330.

³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 331.

speak was because of the presence of the demon who controlled his faculties. We get the sense from reports in Matthew 4:24 and 17:15, that people of that age knew full-well the difference between epilepsy and demon possession. When we read of the self-destructive behavior such as the demon throwing the boy into the fire or in the water, trying to harm him, we should conclude that this is not just epilepsy—this is demon possession. And these people knew the difference. No doubt, this man had done everything he could for his son, and so when he heard that Jesus was in the region, he brought his child, but arrived when Jesus was away with Peter, James, and John. The nine disciples can do nothing for him.

Jesus' response to the whole situation is one of exasperation and lament, almost to the point of heart-break.⁴ These words Jesus uses are generic and said loud enough so that all present could hear, but our Lord's words are truly aimed directly at the disciples, whose lack of faith has created the situation at hand.⁵ In verse 19 Jesus cries out, "*O unbelieving generation, ' Jesus replied, 'how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?'"* The disciples had witnessed Jesus heal countless people. The disciples had witnessed Jesus cast out demons. Jesus himself had sent them out to preach the gospel of the kingdom in the hill country near Nazareth and they had even performed exorcisms themselves. In this case, they are Christ's representatives in his absence. And yet, when a difficult case arises, the disciples utterly fail. The demon has defeated them. Sadly, Jesus' words here echo those of Isaiah 63:8-10 (part of our Old Testament lesson) when God describes his relationship to faithless Israel, a relation which is sadly much like that of Jesus to his disciples.⁶

The cause of this failure is a lack of faith in Christ's power to do as he promised. When Jesus speaks of an unbelieving generation, in effect, he is saying that the disciples are no different from those who seek signs as proof that Jesus is who he says he is. The lament, "how long must I stay with you?" reflects the pain of his humiliation. This continuing hardness of heart and lack of faith is described repeatedly in Mark's gospel (Mark 4:40; 6:50, 52; 8:17-21).⁷ And so, while the disciples have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, they still do not grasp the nature of faith, nor do they fully understand their relationship to Jesus from whom all power to cast out demons is derived. Obviously, Jesus still has much to teach the twelve.

Jesus takes command of the situation. "*Bring the boy to me.*" That the demon knew who Jesus is and what was about to happen becomes immediately apparent. "*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.*" As a sign of fear of Jesus, and of contempt for his mission to save his people from their sins—the cause of all human suffering—the demon now makes one last assault upon this poor child, causing a violent convulsion. Jesus is obviously moved by the boy's distress. "*Jesus asked the boy's father, 'How long has he been like this?'"* Watching his son going through yet another round of convulsions, the man answers Jesus, "*'From childhood,' he answered. 'It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.'*" No doubt, the demon has done everything it can to bring about the boy's death.

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 332.

⁵ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 301.

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 332.

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 332.

Having witnessed Jesus' disciples failure to do anything whatsoever about this, the man now appeals directly to Jesus, although with a tone of caution, if not uncertainty in his voice.⁸ *"But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."* In his response, Jesus picks up on the man's uncertainty and then asks him, *"If you can'?"* It is not at all a matter of whether Jesus can help the boy, in the sense that it is an open question as to whether Jesus has the power to cast out the demon. That is beyond all question. In fact, says Jesus, something else is in view here. *"Everything is possible for him who believes."* In effect, Jesus is saying to the man, "do you really believe that I can cast out the demon?" "Yes or No?" Despite the failure of the disciples, does this poor man really believe that Jesus can deliver his son? And so, it is not a question of whether or not Jesus has the power to do this, it is a question of whether or not the man truly believes that Jesus can do this.

The man understands the intent of Jesus' words and accepts the challenge they contain. According to verse 24, *"Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'"* This man has heard Jesus' words. He believes that Jesus can drive out the demon. But he knows that he is just like everyone else of this generation, and is by nature unbelieving. He believes, but he is still plagued by doubt and not absolutely sure. So, on the one hand, the man knows that Jesus alone can help him and so he can truly answer that he believes. But he also is honest and knows his own weakness, which he now humbly confesses. "I believe, but help my unbelief." Indeed John Calvin's comment here is *apropos*. The man "declares that he *believes*, and yet acknowledges himself to have *unbelief*. These two statements appear to contradict each other, but there is none of us that does not experience both of them in himself. As our *faith* is never perfect, it follows that we are partly *unbelievers*; for God forgives us, and exercises such forbearance towards us, as to reckon us believers on account of a small portion of faith."⁹ This man is just like all of us who profess faith in Christ. Like this man, we too will remain at least partly unbelievers until we die. At least, he was honest enough to admit it.

As has become the case in Jesus' ministry, once he is recognized, people flock to him. Here's a case where Jesus is not only recognized, but there is a demon-possessed child and a heated argument going on between Jesus' disciples and the teachers of the law. Things could get out of hand quickly. Once again, Jesus takes decisive action. According to the report of verse 25, *"when Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. 'You deaf and mute spirit,' he said, 'I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.'"* Unlike the disciples who had failed so miserably to deliver this poor child from this unwanted and destructive demonic presence, Jesus speaks with his full and final authority, and not only commands that the demon immediately leave, but that the demon never return. This boy will be completely and totally delivered.

In verse 26, Mark recounts what happened after Jesus issued his command. *"The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out."* The contrast between Jesus and the disciples could not be any greater. Notice that there is no more mention of the teachers of the law. Whatever it was that they were debating about with the remaining nine disciples was now moot. The nine may have failed, but Jesus did not. As for the poor boy, Mark recounts that *"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."* Once again, here

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 367.

⁹ Cited in; Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 303; Cf. the more modern translation in: John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Vol 2, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, trans T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 209.

was the sign that in Jesus, the kingdom of God had come in power. Even though the boy had not died, there was the symbolism of his death and resurrection. The disciples and the on-lookers were absolutely amazed. The teachers of the law were silenced and probably returned back to the home office, just as embarrassed as Jesus's disciples had been. This poor father's faith and honesty are rewarded, even as his son's life and health are returned to him. All this came about because Jesus spoke and it was so.

Meanwhile, when it was all over, Jesus will explain to his disciples what had happened. As we read in verses 28-29, "*after Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why couldn't we drive it out?' He replied, 'This kind can come out only by prayer.'*" Failure can be a great teacher. Jesus uses the opportunity to instruct his disciples about the nature of the kingdom and true discipleship. Jesus explains to them that evil spirits will only respond to the boundless power of God. And this power is to be appropriated by Jesus's disciples through prayer. But because they were still hard of heart (and just like the boy's father, remained partly unbelievers even though they had just confessed their faith in Jesus as God's Messiah, who came to save them from their sins), they had not thought to pray and seek the power of God. Because the disciples did not do this, they failed miserably. These men had cast out demons before, and must have just assumed that performing the exorcism was sufficient in itself—speak the words and it is so. But they have just learned that this is not the case.

And so having been reminded of their own weaknesses and need for constant reliance upon the power of God appropriated through prayer, it is time for Jesus to return to the Galilee on that mission which would ultimately take him to Jerusalem.

According to Mark, in verse 30, we learn that "*They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples.*" This is a strong indication that Jesus' messianic mission has indeed entered a new phase. There will be no public miracles nor teaching of the multitudes. Jesus is now focusing upon training the twelve. It was during this time that Jesus once again turned to the difficult subject of what lay ahead. Once again, "*He said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.'*" Jesus has already spoken of how he will be killed, the implication was that this will come from the hands of the Jewish religious leaders. He has already spoken of his humiliation in Mark 9:12. But now he adds to what he had previously told them. His death will come about because he will be betrayed, "given up" into the hands of men. This is not only a prediction of the despicable actions of Judas, it is a prediction of how Jesus will be abandoned by his own, as a result of this act of treachery.

At every step of the way, Jesus reveals more and more to the twelve about what is yet to come. And every time he does so, the disciples scratch their collective heads and say, "what on earth is he talking about? He's the Messiah. He's not going to suffer and die. He must reveal his glory. As Mark puts it in verse 32, "*But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.*" It will not make sense until after his death and resurrection.

What application can we draw from this section of Mark?

When Jesus teaches the disciples about the nature of discipleship, and when we witness their failure to cast out this demon, the application for us becomes pretty clear—painfully clear. In this, we see ourselves. On our best days, each one of us is just like the man who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus, and who when challenged by Jesus cried out, "I believe, help my unbelief." Calvin had it right. Because of indwelling sin, each one of us remains partly an unbeliever until we die. This means that we will constantly struggle with faith, doubt, and with indwelling sin. Remember that the law is written on

our hearts. The gospel is not. This is why we need to continually hear the word preached, and why we need to receive the sacraments on a regular basis. When we do so, we are saying “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!” This man’s words are very much our own—or they should be. This should be our confession. And in his wonderful grace and mercy, God deals with our unbelief, by creating faith in our hearts and then confirming it through word and sacrament.

When Jesus told the disciples that all things were possible for those who believe, Jesus didn’t have the word-faith people in mind who have twisted Jesus’ words to mean that if we have faith, God owes us health, wealth and prosperity. The context for Jesus’ words was the failure of the disciples to cast out a demon. The disciples, who simply took it for granted that the demon would flee, if only they spoke the right words (went through the right motions), are now thoroughly embarrassed. The disciples never once sought the power of God through prayer. It was not the words they spoke which caused the demon to flee, it was the power of God. They just went through the motions.

It is precisely because we are partly unbelievers that we need to hear the gospel and receive the sacraments. It is because we are partly unbelievers that we must continually seek the power of God through prayer, and not just go through the motions of the Christian life. If faith comes through the preaching of the word, and is strengthened through the sacraments, and since prayer is the chief exercise of faith, then let us never overestimate ourselves and our spiritual strength, and well-being. As partial unbelievers, our faith is weak and we go about the motions without the power and blessing of God, we will fail. But in Jesus, we have every resource we will ever need, and that without limit or measure. Jesus knows we are partly unbelievers. It is not the strength of faith, nor the intensity of faith, that he’s looking for. It is the presence of faith. He simply asks us to trust in him, and seek his power through prayer. And when we do so, everything is possible. But it is only possible when we confess, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”