

THE POWER OF FAITH

Mark 9:14-29

Key Verse: 9:23

“If you can,” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

In today’s passage a father brought his boy to Jesus. This boy was suffering terribly from demon possession. On seeing him, Jesus lamented, **“You unbelieving generation.”** Jesus saw the unbelief of that whole generation as the cause of the boy’s problem. When we see the generation we live in, we are also swimming in a sea of unbelief. This unbelief is the root cause of great suffering. Sometimes we just feel overwhelmed and helpless, for there seems to be nothing that we can do. But in this passage Jesus shows us the way. Jesus planted faith in one person, saying, **“If you can? Everything is possible for one who believes.”** What does this mean? How can we overcome this unbelieving generation? Let’s learn from Jesus.

First, “you unbelieving generation” (14-19). While Jesus and his three disciples were having a wonderful conference on the mountain, what was happening down below? They found the other nine disciples surrounded by a large crowd and arguing with the teachers of the law (14). Why were they arguing? It started when Jesus’ disciples failed to drive out a demon from a boy. They already felt very sorry, because they had not been included with those who went up the mountain with Jesus. At that moment, a father brought his demon-possessed son. The disciples thought it was their chance to show their ability. They were confident based on their past experience. Andrew may have thought, “I have already driven out demons from adults. This case is just a boy. I can handle it.” So he stepped out and said “Evil spirit, come out!” But nothing happened. Then Thomas thought, “Aha, Andrew failed. I will save the day.” Again, nothing happened. The disciples began to feel embarrassed. So they tried all together in one voice, “Evil spirit, come out.” Then, “Please, come out, we beg you.” This time, the boy just yawned. The disciples were completely defeated. Then the teachers of the law began to harass them, saying, “See, you are powerless. You guys are false leaders. You are deceiving people.” Then the disciples began to retort, “You are more powerless than we are. You are just hypocrites in fancy clothes.” As the argument escalated, the surrounding crowd began to jeer. The disciples were greatly humiliated.

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At this moment, Jesus came. After seeing many disgusting things, the crowd was so happy to see Jesus. They were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him (15). Perhaps Jesus' face was still glowing in the aftermath of his transfiguration. Jesus asked his disciples, **“What are you arguing with them about?”** (16) The disciples seem to have been speechless, and the teachers of the law slithered away. But the boy's father spoke up to Jesus, **“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”** (17-18). We can understand this father's anguished plea. He wanted his son to study well and grow into a strong and mature man. But because of the evil spirit, he was tormented and could not speak, nor did he hear. He was totally isolated without any relationships. In our times, many young people fall under the influence of evil spirits through the Internet and mass media. Then they do not hear God's word, nor do they speak sincerely. They become frustrated and angry and fall into immorality and violence. Rather than being the hope of the nation, they are a source of grief to their parents and society. So there are many broken-hearted parents. This boy's father had come to Jesus for help, but was disappointed by the disciples' failure.

How did Jesus respond? Let's read verse 19. **“‘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.’”** Jesus didn't directly blame anyone. Rather, he lamented over the unbelieving generation. It was not just one or two person's problem, but the entire generation. An unbelieving generation produces this kind of demon-possessed people. Here we should realize the seriousness of unbelief. We consider sexual immorality, violence, murder, terrorism, and the like to be serious crimes, and they are. But these are just symptoms of unbelief. If we think of it like a tree, unbelief is at the root and all other evil things are the fruit. For example, in the early 1960's public schools throughout America began the day with prayer to God. At that time, the serious behavior problems in classrooms were chewing gum and passing notes. Then in 1962 the Supreme Court ruled against having prayer in public schools. It created an atmosphere of unbelief. As time passed, we have seen the bad fruits, such as bullying, gang activity, rape, murder and so many school shootings. Of course, we can consider other factors in this complex issue. But let's listen to the father of Rachel Scott, who was killed in the

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Columbine High School shooting in 1999. He shared this poem before the U.S. House Judiciary Committee: *“Your laws ignore our deepest needs, Your words are empty air, You've stripped away our heritage, You've outlawed simple prayer, Now gunshots fill our classrooms, And precious children die, You seek for answers everywhere, And ask the question “Why”? You regulate restrictive laws, Through legislative creed, And yet you fail to understand, That God is what we need.”* This grieving father’s insightful diagnosis of this generation’s problem was largely ignored. Who can be responsible for dying young people in an unbelieving generation? In regards to the boy in this passage, it should have been the teachers of the law, who exercised influence. They were supposed to study the Bible diligently and plant faith in people’s hearts. Instead they focused on man-made traditions and burdened people. They rejected Jesus as the Messiah and spread unbelief among their people. When they could have been a real help to an anguished father, they were just arguing. Jesus’ disciples should have been men of faith who could help this man. But they were impotent. Jesus grieved over their unbelief. Jesus knew that there was not much time left for him in this world. When Jesus saw leaders arguing with one another instead of helping the suffering boy, it was hard for him to bear. So he said, **“...how long shall I stay with you, how long shall I put up with you?”** But Jesus did not stop there. He showed them the way to overcome their unbelief. Jesus said, **“Bring the boy to me.”** Jesus still had hope for that generation, and he still has hope for us. Thank you, Jesus, for your patience and hope!

Second, Jesus plants faith in one person’s heart (20-29). In response to Jesus’ request, they brought the boy to 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 (20). The boy’s condition seemed to get worse. At this moment, instead of focusing on the boy, Jesus turned his attention to the boy’s father. The evil spirit tried to frighten the father to prevent him from trusting Jesus. But Jesus wanted to plant faith in the father’s heart through which he could bless him. Jesus spoke directly to the father: **“How long has he been like this?”** (21) **“From childhood,” the father 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”** (22).

It is hard to imagine how much this father had suffered. Usually fathers love their sons as themselves. They have a hope for them to grow into great

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and noble people. So they are happy to invest their time and energy without limit. When their sons win contests or make the honor roll, the fathers rejoice. But if something unfortunate happens to their sons, fathers lose the joy of life and fall into sorrow and grief. When this boy's father saw his son fall to the ground and roll around like an animal, his heart must have broken into pieces. He must have fallen into deep despair. Perhaps he blamed himself and felt guilty and ashamed. He must have tried hard to communicate with him. But the boy did not respond to his words at all. The boy even tried to kill himself, not just once, but over and over again.

The boy's father must have tried to help him in many ways, such as bringing him to the best doctors. But no one could help him. Then the father heard about Jesus. Faith began to arise in his heart that Jesus could heal his son. So he brought him. But Jesus was not there. Only the other nine disciples were there. So out of his desperate need, he asked them to heal his boy. When they failed, he must have been discouraged. To make matters worse, an argument broke out, with his son at the center of it like a spectacle. Then Jesus appeared, and new hope arose in the father's heart. Yet when he saw his son's demonic behavior, his heart sank again. He began to wonder if even Jesus was able to heal his son. Through failures, the seeds of unbelief and doubt were planted in his heart. Negative thoughts, fear and fatalism began to rule him. Failure itself is not always a bad thing. There is a saying that "failure is the back door to success." But how we respond in times of failure is important. If we let a sense of failure rule our hearts, it negatively affects our thoughts, emotions, and actions in significant ways. It causes us to give up easily in times of difficulty and to even stop challenging altogether. For example, when we see a troubled young person, we may have a desire to help them and even raise them as Jesus' disciple. But then we remember our bad experiences with others and think, "Well, I already tried so many times and failed. I am not going to try again." This sense of failure may cause us to become relativistic about God's power until we think, "If you can do anything...."

Just after lamenting over the unbelieving generation, Jesus heard the words of relativism and unbelief from the father. Jesus was indignant. Let's read verse 23. **““If you can”?” said Jesus. ‘Everything is possible for one who believes.’”** Jesus did not show empathy to him. Rather, Jesus rebuked his unbelief and challenged him to have faith. Here we learn that unbelief is

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most displeasing to Jesus. Unbelief is a more serious matter than moral sin. When we look at Numbers chapters 13-14, twelve tribal leaders reported to their people after spying out the promised land. Ten leaders, all except Caleb and Joshua, gave negative reports, stressing how strong the enemy was and how weak they were—they felt like grasshoppers. When people heard their reports, they wept aloud and grumbled against Moses. God was displeased with their unbelief and said, **“How long will these people despise me? How long will they not believe in me...”** (Num 14:11, ESV). Unbelief is despising God. When they despised God, God punished them by making them wander in the wilderness for forty years until they all died. How can we please God? **Without faith it is impossible to please God** (Heb 11:6). God is pleased with people of faith and blesses them. In order to receive God’s blessing, the father needed to have the unbelief removed from his heart. Unbelief is like a rock that must be struck with a sledge hammer. Jesus’ word, **“If you can? Everything is possible for one who believes,”** struck the father’s heart and cracked open his unbelief.

The words, **“Everything is possible for one who believes”** are familiar to many of us. We often recite them when facing difficulty. We even shout them out, thinking that if we do so loud enough and often enough we can overcome the obstacle before us. Yet, our hearts are not always certain. When we see a hard situation, it seems that even God cannot solve this problem. We limit God’s power with our own thoughts. This is a kind of unbelief. Sometimes we think that having faith in God is related to problems. When we face a problem, we say, “I need faith to overcome this. Please pray for me to have faith that overcomes.” Then, when the problem is gone, what happens? We no longer feel that we need to live by faith. Our faith vanishes along with the problem. However, real faith is in relation to God. Martin Luther said that faith has three components: understanding, conviction and commitment. Understanding means knowing who God is: God is almighty, God is love, God is good all the time. When we understand this, we can have conviction that Almighty God works always for the good of those who love him. We can put our trust in God and commit ourselves to him, regardless of our ever-changing circumstances. Those who have this faith are not shaken, no matter what happens. They are more than conquerors.

Here we learn from Jesus how to overcome an unbelieving generation. After lamenting over the unbelieving generation, it would be easy to ignore

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everyone who is a part of it. Helping one person to have faith in Jesus seems to make no difference in the generation. But Jesus patiently helped the boy's father to have faith, hoping that he would be a world-changer. One person who has real faith in God can influence their entire generation. For example, if one person among an unbelieving family has faith in God, he or she can be a source of blessing to the entire family. This also applies to one person of faith in a workplace, school, community or nation. When we think of unbelieving people around us, we are tempted to despair and become fatalistic. But when we realize that God put us in that situation precisely to be the light of the world, we find that the faith of one person, myself, is very important. With this faith we can help one person have faith in God. In this way we can overcome the unbelieving generation. When we see that the world is dark, what shall we do? There are two options. We can sit down and complain and blame the darkness. Or we can shine the light of our own faith and help one other person come into the light. That is our choice. What do you want to do?

When the boy's father heard Jesus' rebuke, he was awakened. He realized that the problem was not just his son's demon-possession, but his own unbelief. So he exclaimed, **"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief"** (24). He realized that Jesus wanted him to have faith. So he confessed, **"I do believe."** But at the same time, he felt that unbelief still bothered him. He could not overcome this unbelief by himself. So he honestly asked Jesus to help him. He did not blame others, or even ask for the healing of his son. He asked for help to overcome his own unbelief. This can be our honest prayer. When my oldest son lost faith and wandered in the world about ten years ago, it was hard for me to acknowledge, even to myself. For two years I was heartbroken inwardly, though I did not say much about it to others. I lost the joy of life. One night I brought this problem to God in earnest prayer. Through Romans 8:32 (**"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"**) the Lord helped me understand his own heart. As I was heartbroken over my son, he was heartbroken to give his own son as a ransom for our sins. I could understand the love of God in a much deeper way than before. God's love began to grow in my heart for all young people who are suffering under the power of sin. Since then, the Lord used this problem to help me grow in faith. I learned to always pray and not give up. God really wants me to have faith in him. The problem is not my son's

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condition, but my faith. As I put my faith in God, God has worked in many ways and recently I could experience a breakthrough with my son. But my faith is not always strong. Sometimes unbelief bothers me. So I pray, **“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.”**

Jesus heard the father’s honest prayer. Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, **“You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again”** (25). The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, **“He’s dead”** (26). **But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up** (27). Jesus blessed the father’s faith and healed his son completely. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, **“Why couldn’t we drive it out?”** (28) **Jesus replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer”** (29). Spiritual power is not something that once possessed will always be available. It must be maintained and renewed through prayer. Prayer is to depend on God, acknowledging our weaknesses. Prayer is to submit to God, surrendering our will to God’s will. Prayer is to believe that “I can do nothing, but God can do everything,” and to ask him humbly. We are living in an unbelieving generation. God wants us to have faith in him regardless of the situation. God wants us to help one person to have faith in him by sharing the words of God and prayer. In this way we can overcome our unbelieving generation and render glory to God.