

DEPENDENT FAITH IS THE KEY TO MINISTRY

Mark 9:14-29

Hanging in the Vatican is a painting by Italian artist Raphael titled, *The Transfiguration*. In the uppermost part of the picture is Jesus transfigured and flanked by Moses and Elijah. On the next level are Peter, James and John shielding their eyes from Jesus' blinding radiance. On the ground below is a demon possessed boy, eyes rolled back into his head, mouth gaping in wild raving. Holding the boy is his father looking desperately to the nine disciples to deliver his son. Some of the disciples are pointing upward to Christ Who is the boy's only hope. Raphael has captured something of the overwhelming contrast between the awesome glory of the Mount of Transfiguration and the troubled world waiting below.

This is the contrast before us in Mark 9:14-29.

When Jesus, Peter, James and John returned from the mountain and rejoined the other nine disciples, they found their companions embroiled in an argument with Jewish scribes.

Mark 9:14–18 (ESV)

14 And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. **15** And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. **16** And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" **17** And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. **18** And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."

Simply put, the disciples had failed to exorcise the demon tormenting the man's son.

Undoubtedly the scribes jumped on the failure of the disciples as evidence that they and their Master Jesus were illegitimate imposters. Perhaps the scribes were also arguing that their methods of exorcism would work.

When Jesus arrived, the crowd was amazed by His presence and greeted Him. It was the boy's father that answered Jesus' inquiry as to the argument. In his answer he rehearsed the cruelty of the demon toward his son: it caused his son to be mute and deaf (v.25), threw him to the ground, caused seizures of foaming, teeth grinding and rigidity. Often the demon threw the boy into fires or water attempting to kill him so the boy was covered in burn scars. Luke records the father informing Jesus that this was his only child (Luke 9:38). He was desperate for his son.

This boy is a perfect example of Satan's objective, which is to destroy the image of God in mankind. Anything he can do to destroy this in man is for him, in his twisted thinking, a triumph over God. Satan does this through demon possession and through the more subtle influence of the world that is under his control.

The attacks upon this boy serve to show how radical and real the struggle is between Satan (the destroyer of life) and Jesus (the giver of Life).

Jesus chose the Twelve to be with Him, to preach and to cast out demons (3:14-15). Sent out two by two they had successfully cast out demons (6:12-13), but in this instance they had been foiled.

And Jesus was grieved.

Mark 9:19 (ESV)

19 And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."

Jesus was training His disciples; they were His apprentices to whom He was entrusting His ministry. He was disappointed by their failure; by their lack of faith. He did not give up on them, but He did express His disappointment.

He called for the boy to be brought to Him.

Mark 9:20-24 (ESV)

20 And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. **21** And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. **22** And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." **23** And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." **24** Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

In an act of contempt and spite, the demon convulsed the boy in front of Jesus. Questioning his father, Jesus discovered this demon had been tormenting the boy since childhood including multiple attempts to kill the boy by fire and water. The pure evil and cruelty of this demon is appalling.

It's clear the father's faith in Jesus had been shaken by His disciples' failure. Jesus turned the man's statement around; there was no question about Jesus' ability, but would the father trust Him?

In one of the most honest, heart felt statements in all of Scripture, the father declared his faith and plead for help in his unbelief.

In response to the man's faith, Jesus exorcised the demon and set his son free.

Mark 9:25-27 (ESV)

25 And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." **26** And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." **27** But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

Later, the disciples asked Jesus why they were unable to cast this demon out.

Mark 9:28-29 (ESV)

28 And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" **29** And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Demons have unique personalities and varying levels of authority. The demon tormenting the boy in this story was particularly malicious and belligerent. This kind of

demon can only be driven out by prayer. Jesus did not mean some type of canned prayer, but prayer as the expression of total dependence upon the power and authority of God. Earlier, Jesus had expressed His disappointment in their lack of faith (v.19). In some way the disciples were placing their confidence in their abilities or their methods than wholly in God's power. They needed to learn from this experience that dependent faith is the key to spiritual ministry and warfare.

And they did learn this lesson for in Acts we see that the Apostles dedicated themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4).

This is the lesson for us as well.

For when we think about what we are called to do – to share the gospel with the lost and to build up the saved – these are things that only come about by the power of God working deep within the human soul.

My brother-in-law Colin McDougall writes:

In the face of great and pressing need and explosive numerical growth, they (the Apostles) understood what we do not: more than anything else our people need from us our united prayer for them. What is the greatest need in your church and in your community? Isn't it the need for repentance, for spiritual hunger that only Jesus can fulfill, for changed hearts that result in changed lives, for restored marriages and families, for spiritual revival? I have come to realize that all of the things my people need most, only God can provide.¹

We need to be covering all our ministry in prayer, asking God to work in the lives of those we are teaching, discipling, counseling and to whom we are witnessing. God is the One Who heals and transforms our souls. It is the Holy Spirit Who convicts of sin, judgment and righteousness unto salvation. We are partners with Jesus in His kingdom work, but the power is God's.

Depending on our skills or methods alone will not accomplish the spiritual work God is seeking to accomplish in people's lives. The disciples failed to cast out the demon and in the process discouraged the father's faith. This is a danger of serving in our own strength and not in dependent faith.

Perhaps some of us are like the father; we have been disappointed by followers of Jesus. Unfortunately that is going to happen. As a result, many people reject Jesus because of their disappointment with His followers. How tragic if that had been the response of the father. Jesus does not fail. Jesus is the object of our faith, not Jesus' followers. If you have been disappointed by Christians, we truly are sorry, but come to Jesus – He will not fail you. He will save. He will give you life. He will heal and transform and fill your heart with His love, joy and peace.

¹ Colin McDougall, Jr., *The Praying Leader*, 2008.