

Do you have real saving faith?

We use the word faith in different ways, don't we? We talk about faith as a blind leap in the dark, contrary to reason, a sort of spiritual wishful thinking. Or we think of faith as assent to certain propositions. To be a Christian is to believe certain truths.

But neither of these constitutes what scripture calls saving faith. Saving faith takes hold of Jesus Christ in such a way that power breaks in on our experience and lives, and we are changed by it. Saving faith is like a plug pushed into the socket so that power flows freely from Jesus Christ, animating the machinery of our lives.

Let me ask you again, do you have that kind of faith? Faith that accesses life-transforming power? Power that serves others, power that defeats the dark and the demonic and even defeats death itself?

It is with this question that Mark 9:14-29 is occupied. Before we look at it together, however, let's bow our heads and pray,

"Father, with Samuel we pray, 'Speak Lord, your servants are listening'. In Jesus' name, Amen."

There are three things I want us to notice in this passage. The first of them is **the failure of faith** that takes place in verses 14-19. Would you look at it with me, please?

While Jesus is making His way down the mountainside with Peter, James, and John after His transfiguration, a crowd has gathered around the remaining disciples. When Jesus arrives, He is greeted with a rapidly degenerating argument that was raging between the scribes—the official experts in Jewish religious law—and the disciples themselves.

When Jesus asks about the dispute, it is neither a scribe nor a disciple that answers Him but a member of the crowd who has the most personal stake in the whole situation. His son's condition is the reason for the whole confrontation between the scribes and the disciples. In verses 17-18 the poor man explains what had happened,

“Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not.”

Somehow this man’s son has been possessed by a demonic spirit, which proceeds to do what Satan and his minions always strive for, and that is the total debasing and defacing of the image of God in a human being. The child can’t speak; he is convulsed and taken through a severe epilepsy-like trauma. In verse 22 we learn that the demonic spirit often tries to drown or burn the child. That is what Satan always aims at in all his dealings with us. Whether in the dramatic form of possession, as here, or in the more subtle and mundane form of daily temptation and spiritual attack, his agenda is to always ensnare and entrap, to debase and distort, to twist and warp and wound the human psyche so that, whatever sense of inherent dignity given to us by God as His image bearers, we might have retained, it is almost totally lost, and we are left ruined and broken people.

He brought his son, in the grip of this awful condition to Jesus, but Jesus was on the mountain and unavailable to help, and so quite naturally he turned to His disciples instead. But try as they might, they could not exorcise the demon.

It has been suggested that the reason the scribes were present was as an official delegation sent from the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious council, in Jerusalem to assess and pass judgment on the orthodoxy of Jesus’ claims and ministry. It was an axiom that “the messenger of the man is as the man himself,” (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 331) and so when they saw the failure of the disciples, they pounced. Here is proof positive of the fraudulent claims made by the now obvious charlatan Jesus of Nazareth; after all, if He were who He claimed to be, and could do what he claimed he could do, then His disciples would be able to share in His power. The principle, remember, of discipleship was “the messenger of the man is as the man himself.” The strength of the one is the strength of the other, the failure of the one is the failure of the other. The disciples had failed.

It is not hard to hear the accusations and the counter arguments, the smug denunciations and the prideful self -defense strategies of scribes and disciples bouncing back and forth. In deepest distress, Jesus bursts out with the sharp rebuke of verse 19, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.”

Jesus' rebuke exposes the real problem behind the failure of the disciples to help this man and his son. They were faithless. Their failure to believe in Him and look to Him for power to fulfill their ministries was a source of deepest grief to Jesus. How long must I put up with this? When will you finally get it?

The failure of the disciples is a failure of faith.

Back in chapter 6:7ff, Jesus had previously sent them out and given them power to heal and cast out demons in His name, and they had gone and met with great success in their ministries. But now it seems as though the disciples had come to believe that the power to accomplish the healings and the exorcisms resided in them, as though Jesus' gift to them in chapter 6 was in their power to use as they saw fit. What has happened to them is sadly all too common for Christians. A slow transfer of trust has taken place in their hearts. At first, they went out in fear and trembling knowing the bankruptcy and need of their own hearts and trusted Christ alone for power to do all He had called them to do, but slowly, slowly the more they went on in Christ's service, the more they were aware of their gifts. I can do this. This lies within the realm of my competence. They had begun to talk about their gift-mix and their areas of expertise perhaps. They had begun to use proprietarily language to describe their own ministries perhaps. What has happened? They are now the objects of their own faith, not Jesus Christ. They look to themselves, their experience and past successes and personal competence for success in all they do, not to Christ alone.

They have broken the second commandment. They have made an idol of their own gifts. They have come to put their faith in themselves to meet the challenges of serving Jesus. They had ceased to despair of self and cling to Him.

The first thing this passage highlights for us is the failure of faith. How easily we shift our confidence away from Jesus and onto ourselves.

And before we leave this point, notice that the faithlessness of the disciples, notice that it resulted not only in a failure to deliver the child from bondage but also in the undermining of faith of the boy's father.

Notice when he explained to Jesus what all the fuss was about in verse 17, he said, "Teacher, I brought you my son" It was to Jesus that this man had turned. There was faith there. He was looking to Christ. But now, after all that has taken place that faith is seriously shaken. Look at verse 22, "If you can do anything, have

compassion.” If you can.... Before, Jesus was His only hope. Now after seeing the spectacular failure of the disciples, He is not so sure Jesus can do anything.

One of the terrible consequences of Christians trusting themselves more than Christ is that when they fail, as they inevitably will, to serve others in the power of Christ, the impact on those others can be profound. Unbelief is infectious. It spreads. I believe it was Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, Anglican missionary and theologian of missions, who famously said that the church is the best apologetic for the gospel. That is true. But the corollary is also true. Unbelief in the church is one of the most devastating barriers to faith in the gospel. You hurt much more than yourself when you are the object of your own faith, Christian. You hurt those among whom you live by showing them that you yourself cannot trust it. Why in the world should they?

The failure of faith. Then secondly, there is *the power of faith*. Look at verses 20-24 again.

In verses 25-29 Jesus will deal with His disciples and their failure of faith. But first, He responds to this man and his crisis of faith and desperate need. To his questioning of Jesus’ power in verse 22 “if you can do anything...” Jesus responds by turning the tables, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”

Whether I can do anything for you and your son is really not in question, far more to the point is whether you are prepared to believe that I can do it. This man worries that Jesus is deficient for the job. Jesus refutes the idea of any deficiency in him and points instead to deficiencies in his faith. Will you trust me? The rest of the soul on the competence of Christ is the kind of faith that obtains mercy. Will you trust me to be enough for your son, or will you continue to doubt my sufficiency and trust yourself? Maybe that is a question that Jesus is speaking by His word to some of you here this evening. Will you trust me? The deficiency is not with Jesus. It may well be with your faith in Jesus.

To this, the poor man wept and cried out “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!” What an outstanding confession of faith that is! It is deeply honest and genuinely humble. It confesses the sin of unbelief and pleads for mercy and grace to overcome it. And it confesses that, however deeply rooted the unbelief may be, the germ of real faith in Christ has taken root in his heart nonetheless.

And here we need to pause to remember that faith and unbelief are not mutually exclusive categories. A true believer may struggle long and deeply with

doubt and unbelief and misplaced faith and self reliance and idolatrous trust in other things than Jesus Christ. Those things are sins to be confessed as this man does with tears. But they do not render null and void the faith in Christ that may yet survive in our hearts alongside them.

Believer, when was the last time you repented of your unbelief? That is part of the call of this text. While you believe, cry out, “Lord, help my unbelieving!”

And notice that Jesus does not despise such faith, even though it is mixed and tempered by unbelief. He does not praise it; rather He responds to it. Saving faith, faith that gets hold of the power and mercy of Jesus Christ needs only to be real, not great. It doesn’t need to dominate: it simply needs to live in your heart. It need not chase out all doubts and silence every fear. You may struggle long with nagging uncertainties and yet really receive and rest on Christ alone as He is offered in the gospel. Jesus’ mercy is greater by far than our faith can ever merit. He is gracious—not to great faith but to real faith.

To such faith, Jesus says all things are possible—not because the faith has power on its own, but because, by definition, it sees and feels our own emptiness and rests on Christ’s fullness. It sees and feels our incompetence and rests on Christ’s omni-competence. That’s why it is Jesus who heals the boy, not the believing man. Jesus doesn’t say to him, “to him who believes all things are possible, so you heal him.” He says to him who believes, “All things are possible because I can do all things, and he trusts Me.”

Actually, the language Mark uses to describe what happens to the boy in verses 26 and 27 points to the identity and power of Jesus Christ. Mark uses language associated with resurrection. The boy goes into a vegetative state in verse 26. He appears to have died, and that is what the crowds conclude. But verse 27 literally reads, “But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him and he arose.” The hint at resurrection from the dead through Jesus Christ is not hard to see. For Mark, as central to this story as faith is, the object of faith is still more central. He wants us not just to learn lessons about ourselves and the nature of saving faith. He wants us to learn lessons about Jesus and His greatness. Mark does not simply want to tell us to trust Christ, He wants to supply reasons why we can and should trust Christ.

The point here is simply this: you can trust in Christ because in Him death will be defeated and life and immortality brought to light. Jesus raises the dead. Jesus undoes the curse. Jesus removes the effects of Adam’s first sin. The wages of sin is

death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. And He will do all this, of course, by Himself dying and rising again. Because of the cross and the empty tomb, death will die for all who trust in Jesus.

Here's the great motive for faith. Jesus died for sinners so that we might have eternal life. You get it by faith alone in Christ alone. So cling to Him. Labor to turn your trust from self to the Savior. Confess your unbelief and confess your true faith. Cling to Him.

Then finally, this passage teaches us about expressing faith.

In verses 18-29, Jesus fields the inevitable questions from the disciples about why they failed to heal the boy. His answer indicates the secret of Christian service, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting." Many manuscripts do not contain the phrase about fasting, but whether we include it or not, the point being made is the same. If faith takes a hold of the power and grace of God in Jesus Christ, how ought we to approach ministry and service?

Certainly not as the disciples seemed to have done, in confident self-assurance, but deeply aware that apart from Jesus we can do nothing, deeply aware that we are way out of our league, far outside our area of competence and only Jesus can make an ultimate and lasting impact on any life. So we will not rush into ministry. We will wait on the Lord and pray.

Prayer is faith-given words. Prayer is what faith does when it learns to speak. Even before it learns to speak, like a brand new baby, prayer is a child's dependant cry. Prayer says I haven't got it, I don't understand it, I can't do it. But you can, Lord Jesus. Unless you build this house we who labor in it labor in vain.

So let me ask you now as we conclude, as I ask myself with a convicted heart, what place does prayer have in your Christian life? Your life of prayer is an accurate and revealing index of your life of faith. I don't think it an exaggeration to say that we pray to the degree that we trust Christ.

Some of us may well need to begin again, probably with the prayer of verse 22, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!"?

May the Lord give us all the grace to do it.

Amen.