

Help for a Faithless Generation

Mark 9:14-29

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Introduction

Today in Mark's Gospel, we will see that Jesus identifies His generation as a faithless generation.

- Jesus had been ministering among them as the Messiah God had promised for a couple of years now, but it was only recently that His disciples had confessed that He was the Christ.
 - Yet, it is quite clear that even they have no idea about the work that He had come to do—bearing the sins of His people on the cross.
- He had told them plainly of His suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection, but they did not accept what He said.
 - As He had told Peter who represented them all: “You are not mindful of the things of God—you do not savour the things of God—you are out of touch with God and His work through me among you.”
 - He told them that following Him would mean suffering for them also.
- In chapter 9, where we are now, He had taken His three leading disciples, Peter, James, and John, up on a high mountain where He was transfigured—that is, His glory as the Son of man was made visible to them.
 - In our text today, Jesus and these three disciples return to the other nine disciples who had been left behind. We are told of the deplorable situation in which they find them.
 - Listen as I read it to you, Mark 9:14-29. This is the word of God.

Mark 9:14-29: And when He came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them. ¹⁵ Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him. ¹⁶ And He asked the scribes, “What are you discussing with them?” ¹⁷ Then one of the crowd answered and said, “Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. ¹⁸ 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.” ¹⁹ He answered him and said, “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me.” ²⁰ Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the

spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ So He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²² And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” ²³ Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things *are* possible to him who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” ²⁵ When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!” ²⁶ Then *the spirit* cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he

became as one dead, so that many said, “He is dead.”²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.²⁸ And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”²⁹ So He said to them,

“This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.”

May the LORD bless us, for we have heard His word, and now may He also bless the exposition of His word.

I. See how Jesus here identifies His generation as a faithless generation.

A. Returning from the mount to the nine disciples He had left behind, Jesus found chaos.

1. There was a dispute going on.

- Verse 14 says: **And when He came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them.**

a. What a contrast this was.

1) Jesus had been in the presence of the glory cloud, hearing His Father declare His pleasure with Him, and enjoying for a brief time the company of Moses and Elijah whose spirits had been perfected...

- but now in the valley below, He finds a dispute going on between the scribes and His disciples.

- There was much confusion and strife among His covenant people.

2) It is similar to Moses’s experience when he returned from the presence of God on the mountain to find the congregation worshipping the golden calf.

- It should not have been like this.

- Remember that these were all God’s covenant people.

- The scribes, the multitude, and especially His nine disciples.

b. Jesus’ presence among them brings a great change in the atmosphere.

1) The crowd responded as soon as they saw Him.

- Verse 15 says: **Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him.**

- He was very popular, of course, with the multitude at large (for he healed them), and they were glad to see Him.

- The scribes had seized on the opportunity when Jesus and the leading disciples were away and the nine disciples were not able to defend Jesus their Master as these scribes cast reproach on Him.

2) Jesus immediately takes control of the situation.

- He calls the scribes to speak to Him about their concerns. Verse 16 says: **And He asked the scribes, “What are you discussing with them?”**

- They scribes were not so confident to take on Jesus—these were local scribes, and they had learned that they could not handle Him.

- They say nothing.

- You can feel the tension in the air.

- 3) Then, the father of a demon-possessed boy speaks up and explains that he is the occasion for this dispute.
 - He had brought his son to Jesus to have the demon cast out of him, but finding that Jesus was gone, he had brought him to the nine disciples, who were unable to cast it out.
 - Apparently, this is the occasion that the scribes took to ridicule the disciples and their Master—but now Jesus has come, they are silent.
2. Besides the dispute, there is this boy in this abysmal state that no one is able to help. This is part of the deplorable situation in which Jesus found the nine.
 - a. Listen to how this demoniac boy's condition is described:
 - In verse 17, the man explains: **“Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. ¹⁸ 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.”**
 - b. This was a covenant child! This was a descendant of Abraham!
 - This is not sickness that comes over you, not necessarily on account of sin.
 - This is demon possession—it can only happen as a result of gross sin and unbelief that has not been dealt with.
 - It should not be the case with a child of the covenant.
 - They are holy to the LORD. They belong to the Lord and He has promises to them and their parents.
 - He is there to deliver His people from this sort of thing!
 - Satan will not have dominion over us if we look to the Lord.

TRANS> So there are these two things—this dispute and this demon-possessed boy.

- And because of these two things...

B. Jesus denounces His generation as a faithless generation.

- Look at verse 19: **He answered him and said, “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?”**
1. What strong words these are.
 - A faithless generation is a generation that is devoid of faith in God.
 - And again, these were the people in the world who were set apart as God's covenant people.
 - They were circumcised and with that had the promise of God to circumcise their hearts to love Him.
 - They had the promise of God to redeem them from their sins and from bondage to the wicked one.
 - They were called to look to Him in faith for complete forgiveness and for new life in service to God.
 - But despite all these privileges, they were not doing that.
 - They were guilty of unbelief.

- The God of heaven had been so gracious to them—stretching out His hand to them and calling them to come to Him for mercy and grace that they might be delivered from bondage, but they would not come.
2. Now their unbelief was brought into focus with this demon-possessed boy.
 - a. First, there was the unbelief of the father and the boy.
 - A covenant child could not be possessed like this apart from rebellious unbelief in his parents, and in him if he was of age.
 - We are not told how they got into this situation, but it was not like catching the flu!
 - Demon possession is the result of sinful covenant breaking—rejecting God as our God and Redeemer.
 - b. But there was also the unbelief of Jesus’ disciples.
 - Here this father had come to repentance.
 - He had heard about Jesus and he knew that he needed deliverance for him and his son... so he had come to Jesus to find God’s saving help.
 - But instead he found helpless impotent disciples.
 - These disciples were among the twelve that Jesus had chosen to lead the church after He went away.
 - He had been training them and in His training of them, He had given them power to heal and to cast out unclean spirits.
 - This is something that they were supposed to be able to do—but they could not.
 - They were culpable for this inability.
 - These were the men upon whom the present generation depended to lead them in the way of God’s salvation after Christ went away.
 - They show that they are not at all prepared even now as Jesus makes His way to Jerusalem where He will soon be crucified.
 - What hope is there for the generation whose chosen ministers are faithless?
 - No wonder that Jesus says, “How long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?”
 - c. And besides this, look at the scribes of Jesus’ generation.
 - These are the trained teachers of the gracious word of God where He has promised salvation to His people.
 - Here they are, trying to attack the very Son of God who was sent from heaven to bring that salvation that was promised to them.
 - What hope is there for such a faithless generation?

TRANS> But I tell you...

C. Jesus’ denouncement of His generation could be leveled against ours too.

1. Where has there ever been a generation that was truly full of faith—even among the covenant people?

- We touched on this last week.
 - The promise of grace was given to Adam after the fall, but there was only one family in each generation from Adam to the flood that believed.
 - And what about the time of Moses? The Lord called them a crooked and perverse generation... they would not come to God for His salvation.
 - Time would fail us to do more than mention the time of the judges, the kingdom years, the years after the exile...
 - And then there is this generation of Christ that ended up delivering Him up to be crucified.
- 2. And though the gospel then went out into all the world, there is still much unbelief in the church... much refusal to come to God for His saving mercy.
 - All day long His hand is stretched out in mercy to a crooked and perverse generation, but so few believe, even in the church.
 - Instead of coming to Him to be delivered from sin, even those in the church continue to cherish their sins and to cling to them, never finding repentance, never finding deliverance from the dominion of sin.
 - And so many ministers and elders are full of unbelief...
 - rejecting whatever they and their hearers don't like from God's word and having nothing but an empty show of discipleship—just like the Jews when Jesus came, with all their religion and no faith.
 - We too are a faithless generation!
 - The evil in this demon possessed boy represents the evil that our Lord would deliver us from if only we would come to Him in faith.

TRANS> But I am happy to tell you that Jesus is wonderfully gracious and ministers grace both to individuals and to His ministers.

- Let's take a look at His gracious dealings...
 - first with individuals as represented by this father and his son,
 - and then with the ministers of His people represented by the nine disciples.

II. See how He graciously ministers to the man and his demon-possessed son.

- This is so much the way of our gracious LORD!
- A. This man came to Jesus in faith, but now his faith has been shaken.
 1. He tells of how he brought his son to Jesus because of the unclean spirit that had tormented his son for so long.
 - We can expect that he had heard about Jesus and about how He would deliver those who came to Him from unclean spirits.
 - This man had a work of the Holy Spirit in him that made him want to come to God for the deliverance that He has for His people.
 - He had come in faith and expectation only to be disappointed when Jesus' disciples were not able to cast out the demon.
 2. As a consequence, he dishonours Christ as a man whose faith has been shaken.

- Look at how he speaks to the Son of God when Jesus says, **“Bring him to Me.”**
 - That should have immediately renewed his faith—now the Master has come, and though His disciples have failed, He had denounced their unbelief and is calling for this boy to be brought before Him.
 - Of course *He* can deliver him.
- But instead this man says (from the middle of verse 22): **“But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”**
 - Jesus’ weak and unbelieving disciples have caused this father to question whether Jesus can do anything!
 - What a heavy responsibility ministers have as those called to minister in the name of Jesus!
 - Indeed, what a heavy responsibility we all have—that our lack of faith would infect others and destroy the faith that is rising up in them.
 - How dreadful that we should be the cause of stumbling for another.
 - Tell me, does your life and your walk point others to Christ, or away from Him?
 - In God’s providence, all of us, and especially ministers, can contribute to the unbelief of others...
 - Jesus accused the Pharisees of making their proselytes twice as much the sons of hell as they were!

B. But look at how Jesus restores this man.

1. First, He challenges him about his sinful doubting.

- Just because Jesus’ ministers have failed does not mean that Jesus will ever fail!
 - God stretches out His hand of mercy and calls all to come to Him with their sin and receive His salvation—He presents Himself from Genesis to Revelation as a gracious redeemer to all who will look to Him.
- So when the man says, **“If you can,”** Jesus turns it back on him and says **“If you can believe”** or as some manuscripts have it, He simply says **“If you can...”** mocking what the man has said to Him.
 - It amounts to the same thing, because Jesus adds, **“All things are possible to Him who believes.”**
 - The meaning is clear—if you come to Jesus, looking to Him for deliverance, of course He is able to deliver you!
 - This does not mean that you can come and demand whatever you want from Him. That is not the way of real faith.
 - The way of real faith is that you come to God to put yourself in His hands to do what is best for His saving work in you and to do what He has promised.
 - That means that if He has sent you some illness to test you or to chasten you, He may not take it away... but He will always deliver you from the dominion of sin if you seek that from Him.

- Sin will not have dominion over you because you are under grace.
 - So Jesus is saying to this man... “If you come to me as the One who promises to deliver My people from Satan’s power, of course I can deliver you. There is no question about that.”
2. And I say, how beautifully this man’s faith is restored.
- You can tell from his response that he moves from one doubting Jesus to one who is fully trusting Him:
 - Verse 24 gives us this beautiful faith filled response: **Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”**
 - Now he is looking to Jesus not only to deliver his child, but also to deliver him from the unbelief that is in him.
 - With these words he casts himself completely on the Lord.
 - Jesus has to do it all.
- And you see that having restored this man’s faith...
- C. Jesus graciously delivers his demon-possessed son.
1. The story is wonderful and dramatic:
- **Mark 9:25: When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!”**
 - Notice that Jesus commands the spirit not only to depart, but also never to return to this boy—this is a permanent deliverance... a spirit can choose to go and come back, but not when Jesus delivers us from it!
 - But He does allow the unclean spirit to show his malice... verse 26: **Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him.**
 - The spirit is so violent with the boy that verse 26 continues, saying: **And he became as one dead, so that many said, “He is dead.”**
 - When delivering His people, the LORD often allows things to get worse before He delivers us so we can all the more see His power and grace.
 - Like Pharaoh, He raises him up so that He can be glorified in bringing him down.
 - Verse 27 says: **But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.**
 - It is a picture of resurrection here!
2. Now this man’s faith is stronger than ever!
- He who had wickedly lived in such a way that his son, from childhood, had been taken over by a demon,
 - had now found the grace of the Lord and been granted full deliverance.
 - God has authorised that believing parents can look to the Lord for the deliverance of their children.
 - His promise is to us and to our children.

- When the children come of age, they are responsible for their own faith... we may pray for them and God may hear us then, but then the promise must be received by them—they must come in faith.
 - When they are children, we may represent them to God.
 - David, for example, lost some of his children because of his unfaithfulness—God said so—and was never able to see some of them restored, but the child he had by adultery, though it died, David was sure that upon his repentance, the child had been taken to heaven, for he said that he would certainly go to that child.
- But what a grand thing for this man!
 - Through his own fault his son had been taken over by a demon, but now through his own intercession, his son has been delivered.
 - Both the man and his son have been raised up from spiritual death to spiritual life.
 - Let us learn from this man to cast ourselves entirely upon the gracious Lord of heaven who promises to save all who come to Him.

TRANS> But now we must consider the nine disciples who had been brought to public shame by their failure and would have ruined this man’s flickering faith if Jesus had not intervened.

III. We see here how Jesus not only restores individuals, but also His ministers.

A. He will have faithful ministers in every generation.

1. All through the ages, He has raised up those who call His people back to their gracious God for salvation.
 - Last week we saw this with Elijah—and how God used him to preserve a remnant of His people.
2. We are to pray that God will send forth labourers into His harvest, for the Bible says, “How shall they hear without a preacher, and how shall preach unless they are sent?”
 - There are always plenty of unfaithful ministers, but we are to pray that there will be faithful men who will be able to lead others to Christ.

B. The failure of the nine disciples of Jesus was necessary in order to restore them as faithful ministers.

1. Their humiliating failure exposed the fact that something was wrong.
 - They fully expected that they would be able to cast out the demon from this child—they believed that they could cast it out.
 - Jesus had bestowed on them the power to cast out demons and also to heal people who were sick—and they had rejoiced that even the demons were subject to them.
 - But this time, they tried and nothing happened.
2. This, of course was troubling to them and it got them asking what went wrong.

- At the first opportunity they have, they asked Jesus about it.
 - Look at verse 28: **And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”**
- This was not something they might or might not be able to do.
 - This was a gift that Christ had bestowed on them as His apostles and they were not supposed to fail—ever.
 - Never do you have a prophet or apostle try to do a miracle and fail.
 - It is only here, and only in a situation in which Jesus was on hand to cover for them.
 - But for Moses or Elijah or Isaiah or Peter or John or Paul, there is never an occasion in which they try to work a sign or a wonder and cannot do it.
 - In fact, if this were to happen with a prophet (or an apostle) it would be a sign that they were not really a prophet!
 - The Old Testament actually called for the stoning of those who tried and could not perform a sign or who uttered a prophecy that failed.
 - The nine disciples want to know what went wrong.

C. Jesus tells them the reason they failed was their neglect of prayer.

- His words are in verse 29: **So He said to them, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.”**
1. The disciples had not been keeping up their prayers.
 - It is not that they did not pray for this demon to be exorcised, but that they tried to cast it out when they had been neglecting prayer.
 - Their literal translation is “This kind by nothing is able to go out if not in prayer and fasting.”
 - In other words, no matter what you may do to cast out demons, if you are not men who are in regular prayer, you cannot cast them out!
 - Calvin puts it like this: “You are effeminate exorcists,” saith he [Jesus], “and seem as if you were engaged in a mock-battle got up for amusement; but you have to deal with a powerful adversary, who will not yield till the battle has been fought out. Your *faith* must therefore be excited by *prayer*, and as you are slow and languid in *prayer*, you must resort to *fasting* as an assistance.”
 - It is like a coach telling his team that they have to discipline themselves in exercise, food, and drink if they want to win any ball games.
 - The disciples were relying on their own strength and that is why they failed.
 2. In the parallel account in Matthew, we get to hear more of what Jesus said to His disciples when they ask Him why they could not cast out this demon.

- In Matthew 17:20, we read: **So Jesus said to them, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”**
 - So the root of their problem was unbelief—manifested by a lack of prayer.
 - They had grown accustomed to casting out demons as a matter of course, and were no longer looking to the LORD, who was the only one that could expel the demons.
 - They had become self-reliant and were no longer praying and fasting before the LORD.
 - Perhaps while Jesus was gone on the mount with the other three apostles, these nine had become even more negligent in their prayers.
 - This is very much akin to what will happen soon at Gethsemane.
 - At Gethsemane, Jesus earnestly warned His disciples that they will deny Him and urges them to watch and pray, but instead they continue to fall asleep.
 - Only Jesus prays, and they, not being ready for the battle, fall when it gets too strong.
 - They have not learned to put on the whole armour of God.
 - They suppose that they can serve God without prayer—foolish disciples!
 - They have failed because, unlike their Master, they have not learned to put themselves into God’s hands.
3. Many modern translations omit the words “and fasting,” even though there are only a couple of manuscripts that don’t have them.
- They do so more on interpretive grounds because the interpreters point out that Jesus had told the Pharisees and John’s disciples that His disciples would not fast as long as He was with them.
 - But that misses the point—
 - When Jesus spoke about that, He was talking about the routine fasts that were kept in which prayer was made for the Messiah to come.
 - Jesus’ point was that those fasts were not appropriate when the one they were praying to come had come!
 - But when we see Jesus, He is very regular in going apart to pray, and we often see Him exhorting His disciples to pray also.
 - We are told of Him fasting.
 - Fasting is simply that which is joined to prayer that we might focus and be more intense in our prayers.
 - We set aside eating to devote ourselves to real prayer.
 - The neglect of real prayer is the cause of our own lack of faith.
 - We do not look to God and that makes us weak and feeble in our Christian walk.

A question for you:

- Do you have failure in your service to the Lord that you ought not to have?
 - I am not talking about trials—persecution, sickness, crosses—but I am asking if sin and Satan have dominion over you.
 - Do you have anxiety, fear, depression, a cold heart, consuming lusts, anger, bitterness, sluggish service to God, an inability to impact others for the Lord, a lack of interest in His word that you are not delivered from?
 - It is likely because of your unbelief.
 - You are not looking to the LORD to keep you and to sustain you and empower you.
 - You are trying to serve God without dedicated prayer and fasting.
 - No wonder you are weak.
 - How can you expect to be strong without Him?
- Perhaps today He will awaken you to your need to call on the Lord...
 - the way He awakened the man with the demon-possessed son...
 - And the way He graciously got the attention of His disciples to show them their unbelief and lack of prayer.
 - We do not need formal prayers... we need earnest prayers in which we truly turn to our gracious Lord for the deliverance He has promised.
 - Sin will not have dominion over you, for you are under grace.