



Series: Standalone

Date: November 6, 2022

Speaker: Barnabas Piper, Pastor at Immanuel Nashville

Text: Mark 9:14-27

Title: How Jesus Responds to Our Doubts

As I shared with many of you yesterday in my talks on doubt and deconstruction, I went through a period of severe doubt and deconstruction in my mid-twenties—struggling to know what I really believed, who Jesus really was in my life (despite my upbringing and so much great teaching). At my lowest, most disoriented place, one the men who was walking with me through all this pointed me to the gospels and encouraged me to set aside everything I thought I knew and just look for the real Jesus. So, I tried. And halfway through Mark I stumbled across a passage that reoriented everything for me. It gave me hope as a doubter and it opened my eyes to the heart of Jesus for those who doubt.

And that is what I want to preach from this morning.

Mark 9:14-27

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And

he asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 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. “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.” 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. And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. 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.” And Jesus said to him, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief! “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.” 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.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.



Intro:

There is a lot in this passage, but I am going to focus on just a few verses. And then I'm going to focus on one sentence within those verses. It has become one of the most important prayers in my life, something I carry with me every day. It encapsulates so much of what faith is and how we live it out, especially in the face of doubts. These verses, and that one sentence in particular, show us what faith in the midst of doubt looks like and how Jesus responds to us when we doubt.

Mark 9:22b-25

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!" 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."

I am going to pose 5 questions today, and those will serve as the points of my sermon.

1. What is the father bringing to Jesus?

Obviously, he brings his son to be healed, but really, deeply it's something more than that. He brings the same

thing we bring to Jesus: need, burden, helplessness. He has seen his son tortured by a demon since childhood. He has been able to do nothing about it. He has found no solutions.

- All he could bring is need, burden, helplessness.
- All we can bring to Jesus too.

So, he pleads with Jesus "Have compassion on us."

- We need the compassion of Jesus when we reach a place where we are helpless, where we have no answers...

2. How is he bringing it?

The father doesn't approach Jesus boldly. He comes with doubt, trepidation, weariness, fear. We can see it is his very words.

- "IF you can do ANYTHING . . ."
- He is softening his request and simply hoping that maybe, possibly, Jesus might be able to do a little something. This is the wording of someone on the verge of hopelessness.
- This is not confident. This is not assured. This is not certain.
- This does not sound like how we envision real faith. We are more likely to think of faith as confidence in God. And at its best it is that.
- But this isn't confident at all.



We aren't inclined to think Jesus would be real thrilled or ready to help someone who is so full of doubt.

3. How does Jesus respond?

He shows himself to be someone who will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick. (Isaiah 42:3)

- He does NOT respond with:
- Dismissal
- Reprimand
- Scoffing
- Impatience
- Reluctance
- But rather with a reminder of who He is and what He is capable of
- "If you can"! All things are possible for one who believes."
- Who believes IN ME.
- This isn't a statement either about quality or quantity of belief - it's not saying, "believe more" or "believe better."
- It's a reminder to believe in - to cast our burdens on Jesus, for he cares for us.
- It is a reminder that belief is powerful because of its object, not because of the qualities of the believer.
- What makes "all things possible" is bringing our needs to Jesus.

- They are possible because of who He is, not because of how much or how well we believe.

This response by Jesus, this gentle and kind heart, is what allows the father to respond the way he does. And this response is the best and clearest example I know of for how we can respond when we doubt:

4. What does the father's response show us?

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

- He trusted Jesus immediately. He came to Jesus uncertain, but ready to trust. He took Jesus at His word.
- His cry seems almost like a contradiction—I believe; help my unbelief. Those seem like opposites. How can both be true? But it is actually a complete declaration of faith.
- To simply have said "I believe" would have been dishonest
- Denying the existence of his doubts
- Seeking to persuade himself of a confidence he lacked - kind of a power of positive thinking, or speaking something into existence
- He needed to also pray "help my unbelief" to cast himself on the mercy of Jesus, to admit his need and his weakness.
- "I believe" is a profession of faith



- “Help my unbelief” is the prayer of faith.

Our faith is not measured in certainty, by how confident or sure we are, but by trusting Jesus with our needs and questions.

- The father asked Jesus to help his unbelief; he looked the Son of God in the eye and said, “I need help only you can give.”
- He did believe, even as he doubted. Coming to Jesus with anything is belief.
- Belief isn’t a formula measured according to its purity: “True belief must be X% pure to be genuine.” Or a class in which you must get X% in order to pass. It isn’t measured on performance.
- A speck of belief is real belief. It is enough to cry out to Jesus “help my unbelief.”

In response, Jesus shows the father that anything is possible for the one who believes, who brings their need to Jesus.

- He displays his power and exhibits exactly why he is worth believing in
- He met his need and strengthened his faith

Now, I’m sure some of you are saying at this point, that’s great, I’m glad, and I wish it was true for me. But . . .

5. What if we’re still burdened by doubt?

What if belief doesn’t come easily? (And, frankly, all of us should be asking this question. Doubt doesn’t die easy, and it comes hunting for all of us in one way or another.)

After all, James does have some pointed words about doubt in his epistle (James 1:6-7):

6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.

But we saw that the father did ask with doubt. So how did he receive from the Lord anything good? Is the Bible telling us two different things?

The short answer is NO. James is talking about someone who is coming from a place of unbelieving doubt, unmoored by their doubts, looking for answers here and there and everywhere - turning to anything and everything except Jesus.

- They are not anchored to Christ, so they are tossed around in their soul, lost and flailing. They are at the mercy of any feeling or bit of teaching they find through YouTube or TikTok or books or whatever comes their way.



- They don't come to God in dependence and belief (believing doubt). If they come to God at all it is to challenge and as a skeptic.

That isn't the case with the father in Mark at all. He approached Jesus with doubts, yes, but with a readiness to believe and anchor himself to whatever Jesus could offer.

Friends, bringing our doubts to Jesus is faith. What else are we supposed to do with them? How else are we supposed to resolve them - this is what James wants us to see. He is highlighting how essential confidence in the Lord is and looking to Him first.

- The only anchor in the midst of doubt, in the midst of trial, is Jesus. Anything else leaves us "driven and tossed by the wind."

"Help my unbelief" is a prayer of confession, yes, but mostly it is a prayer of faith.

- The prayer of faith comes from the gift of faith; praying it all shows that God has already given us the gift of faith.

- There's no shame in this prayer. There is beauty, there is worship, there is a declaration of what only Jesus can do.

"I believe; help my unbelief" is a prayer for all Christians at all stages of life; we never outgrow it at any point. It is as relevant to you now as it is to your grandparents. Life will always bring seasons and circumstances that cause us to have questions and doubts.

So, we pray "I believe; help my unbelief" in the midst, over and over again.

- We drag ourselves to Jesus in weakness, as an act of real faith. And we are anchored to Him in the midst of life's storms

Sometimes "help my unbelief comes easier than "I believe," though. Sometimes we see our problems, our sins, our struggles, our doubts much more clearly than we see the real Jesus. We feel like failures and like our faith is so small. So, we pray I BELIEVE too. We need both halves of this prayer.

- We believe that God is who He says He is throughout scripture - Loving, good, powerful, present, just, patient, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love

- We believe that His word is a perfect and sufficient revelation of who He is so that we can hear from Him and truly know Him.

- We believe that He keeps his promises.



- We believe He is unchanging and constant - not changing His mind, not changing His personality, not following trends, not moving on from us, so that we can always rely on Him

We turn time and again to God's word to listen to Jesus. We tell our doubts the truth of Jesus. We tell our pain the truth of Jesus. We tell our fears the truth of Jesus. We tell

our temptations the truth of Jesus. We preach these truths to ourselves and to each other. We sing them to ourselves and to each other.

Jesus is the answer to our doubts. He welcomes us in the depths of them. He loves us in the midst of them. And He works through them for our good and to give us a deeper, stronger, happier faith in Him