

September 28, 2025

UNBELIEF, PRAYERLESSNESS, AND PRESUMPTIVE SELF-RELIANCE

Mark 9:14-29

(21 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

A few weeks back we all witnessed a tragic reality as a brother in Christ was shot and killed, leaving his young wife and children without their husband and father. And as a result, it may be that many of us were gripped by fear. After all, we know that we have an enemy who hates the people of God, and it seems that in recent days, violent reactions against the church have increased—whether in the form of what we saw last week, or church shootings, or mass killings at Christian schools. And this might leave us thinking that the great threat we face as a church is violence from evildoers who would love to see the people of God shed their blood. But as real as that threat may be, it actually isn't my greatest concern for us, and I don't think it's our greatest threat.

Last summer I sat down with a man who'd served on staff at his church for decades but was no longer there. I wanted to interview him for multiple reasons. The main reason is that I'd heard amazing reports of how the Spirit had worked powerfully in that church in the 80s and early 90s, and I knew that he'd had a front-row seat to all of it, so I wanted to hear his eye-witness testimony. And he didn't disappoint. He spoke of people pulling into the parking lot and walking into the building with a buzz because there was such excitement about what the Spirit might do in those days as the saints gathered. The pastor in those years would sometimes call for impromptu offerings when there was some need, and the person told me about one night when this church of only a few hundred took up one of these impromptu offerings and gave \$50,000. He mentioned stories of people taking off watches, bracelets, and rings and putting them into the offering plate. He told stories of the service ending but no one wanting to move because the Spirit's presence felt so weighty. And in some of those moments, people would stay after to publicly confess sin, repent, and praise the Lord spontaneously. It was a fascinating conversation.

But then the conversation took a turn as he mentioned the downfall of the church. In the end, all of these things were only spoken of in the past tense. He mentioned the decline and struggle of the church in the last number of years, leading to the present situation where he'd now left, and it didn't look like the church would survive. But, interestingly, this church wasn't in this state of decline and possible death because of any attack. There'd been no church shooting. Prominent members hadn't been martyred. Persecution had been quite minimal. So I asked him the obvious question, "What ultimately was responsible for the church's downfall, especially in light of how such grace had been clearly lavished on this congregation for years?"

I thought of that conversation this week because much of his answer to that question is contained in the story we're looking at this morning from Mark 9:14-29. In fact, if we were asked, "What is the greatest threat to us as a church?" it may well be that our best answer would be to look at the warnings and failures that are present in this text. Therefore, I want to highlight three needs that we have that are exposed in examining the events and dialogue contained in

this text, and I pray that this might be used as the means to help us to walk in persevering faithful obedience. But, first, let's set the stage by looking at what's going on in the story.

As our text opens, Jesus and the three disciples he took with him up the mountain come back down to the real world, and, boy, are they thrown right into the midst of it. Apparently, as Jesus and the three have been gone, the others haven't been idle. We're told that a father had brought his son to Jesus, hoping Jesus might heal him, for his case was severe. As the man describes, a demon would torture this boy by making him unable to speak and causing something like epileptic seizures so that the boy would be thrown down, foam at the mouth, become rigid, and grind his teeth. No doubt it was a horrendous scene for any father to see, especially while feeling helpless to do anything about it.

But he'd heard of Jesus and his miraculous work of healing and casting out demons from others. So, he'd brought his son to him, no doubt hopeful his nightmare of watching his son endure this suffering might finally come to an end. But when he showed up with his son, Jesus wasn't there, only his disciples. And this is where things got interesting. He'd asked the disciples to cast out the demon, and they'd been pleased to do so. Except they ran into a problem. To use the father's words when giving this report to Jesus: "They were not able" (v. 18).

This is where an argument had broken out, Mark tells us, between the scribes and Jesus' disciples. Perhaps the scribes used this failure of the disciples to pounce and argue that Jesus hadn't equipped them as thoroughly as he should have or was a charlatan. After all, the scribes were always trying to discredit Jesus by pointing to what they thought were his disciples' acts of disobedience or failures. And it seems that on this occasion the disciples had pushed back to the point that an argument had broken out between the two groups in front of the crowd. That's when Jesus and the three who'd accompanied him on the mountain come to the scene and get the news from this desperate father whose report climaxes with the declaration that the disciples "were not able" to help his son."

If we did not know the story, it'd be interesting to see what we might guess comes next. Perhaps we think that Jesus jumps in to defend his disciples, noting that there was no deficiency on their part. But instead, Jesus answers, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" (v. 19).

Now, this raises the question of who is included in the label "faithless generation." Who is Jesus calling faithless? It could be the father, the crowds, the scribes, his disciples, or any combination of the above. But, minimally, I think we can say that Jesus is including his disciples as not having faith in this situation for two reasons (whether or not he's including others as well). First, they were the subject just prior to this declaration. In other words, the last thing said before Jesus responds, "O faithless generation" is the dad saying that the disciples were not able to heal his son. So, it seems odd to hear the report of their failure, followed by Jesus' declaration, and not think it includes them. Second, when Matthew records this same incident, as the disciples question Jesus as to why they couldn't cast out the demon, he answers, "Because of your little

faith" (Matt 17:20). Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that Jesus identifies his disciples as lacking faith.

But then that raises a question as well in my mind. Here's why. When you and I think of lacking faith, we might think in terms of lacking ability. In other words, if you say, "Fall backwards, and I'll catch you," I respond, "I don't know about that," you would probably say something like, "C'mon, don't you have faith?" And you'd be saying in that, "Don't you have faith that in my willingness and ability to catch you?" And so, if that logic is applied to the disciples, we might think that Jesus is indicting them as faithless because they didn't really believe they were able to cast out the demon and heal this boy. They didn't have faith in their ability to get this done.

But actually I don't think that's the case. I think they genuinely thought they were going to be able to pull this off. After all, consider a few things. First, they tried. I mean, if they didn't think they could do it, they really easily could have said, "We don't have the ability to do these things, but just wait for Jesus. I'm sure he'll be down from the mountain shortly, and he's great at this kind of thing." Second, they'd done it before. Back in Mark 6:7-13 we were told that Jesus had given the twelve "authority over the unclean spirits," and they had "cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them." So, it'd be unreasonable to think they stepped into this situation thinking they couldn't do what they'd already done. And, finally, they ask Jesus at the end of our text why they couldn't cast out this demon, which suggests that they were surprised by their failure, thinking they were going to be able to do it.

So, the question is why were they branded as "faithless" by Jesus here (and as having little faith according to Matthew's account of the same story) when they likely thought they were going to be successful in casting out this demon? And I think the best answer is to say that instead of faith in the power of God working through them, they exhibited presumptive self-reliance. In other words, they probably thought that the ability to do this was theirs, and they walked into this with self-reliance, presuming they just needed to walk through the same steps as when they'd done this before. They lacked faith in that they weren't looking to and trusting in the Lord to provide what they needed but were confident in themselves. And that's the first exhortation I want to give to us.

We need to fight against presumptive self-reliance

As illustrated with the disciples, who'd successfully cast out demons before, sometimes the danger to our faith is having success. It can lead us to think that we're able, that the power and ability to obey the Lord lies with us, and that things will continue to go well as long as we keep at it. And as a church, this can be a threat to us. Let me say it this way. If someone approaches one of our pastors later out in the community and says, "I hate the Jesus whom you preach" and shoots and kills us, I actually don't think that threatens the likelihood of this church continuing to be a gospel-preaching, Bible-proclaiming church in ten years. But, if we begin to think that the blessings we've seen over the last number of years lie with us, our power, ability, and intelligence to know how to do this, I fear that we might not be a gospel-preaching, Bible-proclaiming church in ten years, if we even exist at all. Remember, God resists the proud.

We need to see that doubt isn't the only way you can demonstrate a lack of faith. Presumptive self-reliance is another way, and I think it may be more dangerous. So, let's make sure that we're constantly aware that everything is by the Lord's gracious hand, that we're entirely dependent on him and his mercy toward us, and that Christ alone is due praise for all good things that happen here, for he alone is responsible. We must be on guard against presumptive self-reliance.

As the story continues, Jesus doesn't leave this helpless man who is desperate to see his son healed in need. Rather, after hearing of the disciples' inability and expressing the faithlessness of those around him, Jesus says to this father, "Bring him to me" (v. 19). Now, one of the things we've seen throughout this gospel is that Jesus' presence provokes demons to reveal themselves. In other words, it's not that the world was much more demonic in Jesus' day than ours, but his divine presence brought these evil spirits—who might've otherwise preferred to stay in the shadows—to reveal themselves. And that happens here as well. As the boy is brought to Jesus and the demon recognizes the Lord, he once more goes into action, tormenting the boy by causing him to convulse, fall to the ground, roll about, and foam at the mouth.

Jesus, then, asks the father how long the boy has suffered like this, and the father answers that it's been like this from childhood. But, interestingly, the father doesn't stop with just answering the question. He adds the note that the demon has also done things to try to kill the boy, like throwing him into fire or water. Then the father says to Jesus, "But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (v. 22).

Now, if we're hearing in the father's statement some doubt about Jesus' ability to heal his son, I think we're hearing rightly. And Jesus heard the same thing, repeating the father's words back to him ("If you can!") as if he's amazed that this father questions Jesus' ability. Then, Jesus puts the responsibility back on the father, saying, "All things are possible for one who believes" (v. 23). In other words, Jesus is saying that the issue isn't in Jesus' ability—he's able to do all—it's in whether or not this father believes Jesus is able to heal his son. And what's fascinating is that this man responds in such an honest way to Jesus, saying, "I believe; help my unbelief" (v. 24). That is, "I believe, but I still have some lingering doubts and need your help."

Jesus responds to this father's plea by rebuking the unclean spirit, commanding it to come out and of the boy and never enter him again. And after convulsing the boy and leaving him, the evil spirit left the boy like a corpse so that others thought he was dead. But Jesus took the boy by the hand, raised him up, and sent him on his way with his life forever changed.

But I want to pause for a second at that detail when the father answers Jesus' call to faith by saying, "I believe; help my unbelief." I think that's a model for us of another exhortation I want to give us, namely, that we need to run to Jesus in the midst of our doubts.

We need to run to Jesus in the midst of our doubts

The father's response is quite instructive for us. He's not dishonest. He tells the Lord that he does believe while also not being able to eliminate all his doubts and unbelief. But then note what he does. He confesses his unbelief by pleading with the Lord to help him with it. In other words, he's running to Jesus, asking him to help him believe.

Far too often we respond to our doubts and unbelief by distancing ourselves from Jesus. Perhaps we read our Bibles and questions arise in our minds about whether it's trustworthy and true, and we respond by reading our Bibles less and less until we're not reading it at all. But that's actually sabotaging faith. We're choosing to abandon the very thing that brings faith. Yet, almost without exception, if I have meetings with people who are doubting, they've pulled away from the very things that the Lord ordains to create, build, and nurture our faith. We're to walk in community, exhorting one another daily so that we're not hardened by the deceitfulness of sin in our unbelief (Heb 3:12-14), and yet people pull away from faithfully gathering with the saints. I've already noted pulling away from reading Scripture. And, in their doubts, people often turn from the Lord, seeking him in prayer less and less.

Brothers and sisters, when unbelief arises, the answer is not to distance ourselves from the Lord but to run to him. Run to his people, run to his Word, run to him in prayer, and plead with him to help you. That's what the helpless father does in this scene, and the Lord answers his plea. He heals his son. Let's not become an unbelieving people because we choose to run from the Lord and his means of grace. Rather, let's be a people who fight any unbelief that arises by running toward our Lord, even as the father does here.

After the boy is delivered from this demonic torment, there's one more scene in the story. After Jesus and the disciples leave the crowd and enter a house, the disciples approach Jesus, asking him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" (v. 28). And Jesus answers, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer?" (v. 29).

The first thing I want to say there is that this answer isn't at odds with what Matthew says. No doubt Jesus said it was because of their little faith (as Matthew says) and that they needed to be prayerful (as Mark says here). Again, I think the idea is that they didn't pray and trust in the Lord with faith because they presumed they were going to be able to do this without the Lord's strength and provision. So, these are saying the same things.

However, it is interesting that Mark highlights Jesus' note of prayer. In short, it reveals that prayer is our way of trusting in the Lord. In other words, one way that we reflect that we aren't self-reliant and know we have great need is to cry out to the Lord in prayer, for his strength, grace, and provision. We fight presumptive self-reliance by being a people of prayer. Therefore, as we look at the last part of our story, it should remind us that we need to pray faithfully.

We need to pray faithfully

Prayer is our way of admitting our weakness and trusting in the Lord. It's our way of saying, "God, I need you." It's our way of acknowledging that we are utterly dependent on his grace in

all things. And apparently, prayer had not been a consistent reality in the disciples' lives as they had drifted into thinking they had all they needed in themselves. And it may be that prayer has become something that is not consistent in our lives as well as we're drifting into a mindset that says we have all we need in ourselves. And if that's the case, I want to call us to repent this morning. Let's today begin to build a consistent and daily practice of prayer in our lives. After all, apart from our Lord we can do nothing.

As I asked the man in that interview what led to this once-great church's downfall, he spoke of things like pride and presumptive self-reliance that drove away faith and prayer. I know it's easy for us to see stories of violence, even as they've continued this week, and think that's the great threat against us. It isn't. I don't mean that we won't face violence. It feels increasingly likely in our culture that we will suffer more and more for our faith. What I'm saying though is that persecution won't destroy Christ's church, but these things could.

Therefore, let's renew our commitment to understand our great need from the Lord, knowing that apart from him we can do nothing. When unbelief creeps up, let's commit to run to the Lord, his Word, and his people, not away from them. And let's commit to be a people of prayer, understanding that prayer is an expression of our neediness before the one who can do all things. And we should be driven to approach his throne boldly in prayer because our Lord has already lived, died, and risen for us. So, let's come to him now as we come to the table. Amen.