

“Help Me in My Unbelief!”

(Family Matters, part 3)

Mark 9:14-29, Psalm 22

[65] Good morning. It is such a blessing to be in worship together with you today. God’s house is a place where we can celebrate, where we can grieve, where we can find hope and joy in this life and in the life to come, and the beauty of it all is, we can do this together. Turn to your neighbor and say, “God is for you, not against you.” No matter what brought you here today, you are in the right place. We are in this together.

Would you please pray with me? Almighty God, you knew us and loved us even before we were born. You formed us and ordained all our days before one of them came to be. Grant us now your Holy Spirit to guide us as we encounter your truth. Give us the confidence that you meet us even in the deepest places of our doubt, so that we can boldly proclaim your goodness. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

[66] Have you ever had a real moment of doubt? When someone told you something so incredible, so miraculous, that you just couldn’t believe it? Allow me to give you one example. Many of you know, I’m a fan of Northwestern University football. What you might not know is, back in the eighties, Northwestern set a record of 32 consecutive losses. To put it politely, they just weren’t good at all. Now, around the same time, Notre Dame was one of the best teams in college football, winning national championships. So in 1994, when the two of them played a game, I didn’t bother watching it on the TV, because I was pretty sure of the outcome.

I was at work, and my little brother, Todd, came running out to meet me. “Guess what?” he said. “Northwestern beat Notre Dame!” My initial thought was, “That’s not funny.” As a fan, we tended to be the brunt of everyone’s jokes. I simply didn’t believe him until I saw it in the news the next day. Northwestern really had won. The whole scenario was too impossible for me to dream up. And that was just a football game.

[67] Do you ever have moments of doubt? All of us have moments when we desperately want to believe that something is possible, but every fiber of our being says, “No. It’s not logical. It’s not normal. It’s not even likely. It can’t

happen.” Or maybe the feeling is more subtle. We want to hear some good news, but the way life has been going lately, we think, “Maybe there’s a 45% chance something good will happen.”

Or how about this: have you been praying for someone for so long that you begin to wonder if God even exists? Is there anyone brave enough here to raise their hand and say, “That’s me. I’ve had doubts in my faith.” I, for one, will raise my hand. I know, you’re thinking, “What? You? Pastor?” Yes, I’ve had doubts. I’ve wondered why certain things happen, why God doesn’t come down now from heaven and set things right. I’ve wondered if miracles are true.

We’ve all had doubts. Some of us are more likely to admit it than others, but none of us have absolute certainty about anything. That’s why it’s called “Faith.” The difference is how we handle our doubts; they can discourage us, or they can actually strengthen us and our families. With Jesus’ help, we can overcome our doubts.

[68] Grab a Bible and open up to Mark 9. If you’re using a pew bible, it’s on page _____. Here is the background for this story: Jesus has just returned from a mountain-top experience, what we call “the transfiguration.” Jesus became dazzling white, the great prophets Moses and Elijah appeared out of nowhere, and a thunderous voice spoke out of heaven. If there ever was a moment to believe Jesus was the Son of God, this was it. And so, Jesus returned from this powerful moment to find his disciples arguing.

[69] Jesus asks, “What are you arguing about?” (verse 16) Apparently, while Jesus was gone, a man had brought his son to be healed. And the disciples had tried to heal the boy, but they couldn’t.

Why do you think they were arguing? They couldn’t heal the boy, so I think they were looking for someone to blame. The Bible says the experts of the law were there with them, people who knew the Hebrew Bible inside and out. I think everyone involved was pointing fingers. Who knows exactly what they were arguing about, the point is, the disciples couldn’t heal the boy on their own.

What Jesus says next astounds me. Look at verse 19. “You unbelieving generation, how long shall I put up with you?” My own translation would be, “I’ve had it up to here with you disciples not listening!” Honestly, I have a hard time with these words of Jesus. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, patient, and kind.

And while Jesus was completely divine, he was also completely human. The author of the Gospel of Mark is trying to say that even Jesus became frustrated. Faith in Jesus is not a simple walk in the park. It has ups and downs, and even Jesus was surprised sometimes at how people could slip.

[70] So Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter. He says, “Bring the boy to me.” I used to read this line with the same cutting tone as the first. “Fine! Just bring him to me. Let’s get this over with.” And then I realized, maybe the emphasis was supposed to be on the word “me”. Bring him to Jesus.

How often are we avoiding the real issue when we want to help our children? Are we looking for a worldly answer to our problems when the issue is spiritual? Are we so caught up in modern medicine that we forget the spirit also needs healing? We are awash in medical knowledge. Everyone is looking for the right medicine, the right pill, the right diet to solve their problem. Yet I believe we need holistic healing—healing of the body, mind, and spirit together. We need to see our doctors and take our medications, and we need to offer up our broken spirits to the Heavenly Physician, Jesus, who knows our brokenness and pain.

Jesus says, “Bring the boy to me.” They finally do what they should have done in the first place. And then Jesus asks another strange question. In verse 21, he asks the boy’s father, “How long has your son been this way?”

[71] I believe Jesus already knew the answer, but I think he asked this question to get to the heart of the matter. The father was desperate to see his boy healed. He had been sick for years. The boy had nearly died multiple times. I know other parents could preach a better sermon than me on what it’s like to pray for your child, over and over and over again, and not hear the answer you’d like. I don’t know why it happens. I can only say this man felt the same desperation.

The father says to Jesus: “My boy has been sick his whole life....If you can do anything, help us.” (my paraphrase of verses 21-22) And Jesus retorts, “If you can? Anything is possible for the one who believes.” (verse 23).

Stop right there for a moment. Have you ever asked God in your prayers, “If you can...”? Did this man doubt what Jesus could do? The answer is, strangely, YES! And Jesus didn’t rebuke him, or ridicule him. Jesus got this man to express what was on his heart.

“I do believe. Help me in my unbelief!”

The man confessed his doubts publicly. He didn't hide them. He didn't put on a fake smile and say, “Well, of course I believe. That's why I brought my boy to you!” He didn't argue, explain away, or make up some excuse. He was real before God.

[72] I read an article in Ministry Matters about the difference between dishonest and honest doubt. “[Dishonest doubt] is rooted in the proud, sinful mind. This kind of doubt says it must have verification, in its own way, on its own terms, in order to accept and believe. The person harboring this kind of doubt really does not wish to believe.”¹

Dishonest doubt says, “Prove it. Prove to me that God exists. Prove to me that miracles happen. Show me, right here, and right now, some evidence.” Dishonest doubt is the opposite of faith. It's straight up denial. Defiance. It's the kind of doubt that says, “I don't need to believe in God.”

[73] And then there is the honest doubt that this father has. “[Honest doubt] is agony and yearns for light. There is something strong, something good, in honest doubt. It is not negative or neutral; it is actively seeking faith.... Those who pass through the valley of honest doubt emerge with stronger faith than those who never dared face their doubts.”²

The Gospel of Mark exists for one purpose, that we would know Jesus Christ is Lord. Yet we are human. We are finite. We doubt. We might say, “We can't see God like Mark did. We can't be 100% sure.” And we argue about the little things, instead of going to Jesus, our Lord, and the source of our faith.

[74] We are in good company. Even those who saw Jesus transfigured in glory on the mountain top still doubted. Peter denied Jesus the night before the crucifixion (Mark 14). The same night, the other disciples ran away (Mark 14). Even when Jesus appeared to all of them after the resurrection, the Bible says “They doubted.” (Matthew 28:17) These founders of the church, these incredible apostles, guess what? They weren't perfect.

¹ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/4904/sermon-options-april-27-2014>

² Ibid.

And we don't have to be, either. We can be just like this father. We can say, “Lord, I do believe. Help me in my unbelief. I don't have it all together, Jesus. Help me.”

[75] We want to pray for our children...amen? But is there is a part of us that says, “What if God doesn't answer our prayers?” Should we just make our prayers safe? Should we make God's job a little easier, a little more probable?

Don't do that. Pray boldly, and admit your doubt. Honest doubt is healthy. It makes our families stronger. Our children don't need to see perfect people, they need to see real people. If the greatest desire of our hearts is that our children would follow Jesus, we need to be honest with our doubts. This father publicly proclaimed his doubt, in front of his own son. We need to do that, too. Our doubt needs to spur us on, not stop us. We need to pray in belief of what Jesus can do. We need to believe that God always gives us what we need, not what we want. We need to believe that God will work through all the things in our life, no matter how confusing, frustrating, or traumatic.

[76] Do we believe that God can work miracles? When we pray for our ex-spouses, or for the people who hurt and cheated us, do we believe God can work miracles? When we pray for our parents, our relatives who won't speak to us, do we believe that God can work miracles? When we pray for our children who aggravate us, do we believe that God can work miracles? Can I pray for miracles, and in the same breath, confess my doubt? Let the world hear our answer: YES!

[77] It is OK to doubt. We all do. But in the end, we don't let doubt win. In this story, the man's love of his son overcame his doubt. That should be our goal, too. Our love for our children should overcome any doubt we have. It's not our measure of faith that matters, it's the source of our faith: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died for our sins, who gives us the power to overcome our doubt. Bring your unbelief to Jesus, openly and honestly, and he will help you overcome it.

Let's pray with faith together, friends.

MEMORY VERSE:

Mark 9:23 “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What did you do as a child that drove your parents crazy?
2. What do you believe about evil spirits and their influence on sickness?
3. What doubts have you experienced about God?
4. When have you felt like your faith wasn't “good enough”?
5. How can God use our love for our children to overcome our doubts?