Mark Lesson 29 (2023)

**THE WHOLENESS OF GOD THROUGH FAITH**

Mark 9:14-29

Key Verse: 9:23

“‘If you can?’ said Jesus. ‘Everything is possible for one who believes.’”

 In today’s passage, Jesus heals a boy plagued by epileptic seizures. The demonic condition of the boy is creepy and makes us feel uncomfortable and even powerless. Even though he was believed to be possessed by an evil spirit, we wonder why. So many questions arise. Recently, Richard Alex Murtaugh, a 54-year-old South Carolina lawyer, was found guilty of killing his wife and son, Paul. (PIC#1) Hearing about this murder case made me feel sick to the stomach. It is unbelievable that someone so successful as him could do such horrible things to his family members. Sadly, we hear many incredible stories like this from everywhere in the world. How can we deal with abnormal symptoms in many people’s lives today?

 Casting out demons, as Jesus did in today’s passage, is generally called “exorcism.” Exorcism has been widely practiced in many parts of the world, regardless of religion and culture, for centuries. However, it is not as popular today as it has been in the past. The recent development of neurosciences and human psychology is partly the main reason. When we look at Jesus in today’s passage, we find that Jesus dealt with the problem of unbelief much more than just exorcism. Jesus highlighted the importance of faith to bring the wholeness of God. He said to the boy’s father, “If you can? Everything is possible for one who believes.” We can also learn invaluable lessons on dealing with the abnormality of human souls with psycho-spiritual issues.

 Look at verses 14-15. “When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.” I always considered myself athletically gifted. But in high school, I was not chosen to be a class representative for a soccer tournament. I felt humiliated and got angry because my pride was hurt. When Jesus took only three disciples and went up to a high mountain, the nine left behind didn’t feel good about it. They could have felt humiliation, rejection, or even anger.

On the other hand, it was an excellent opportunity for them to deny their pride, grow in humility, and become genuine servants of God. They had been told to practice following Jesus in the previous passage. Jesus told his disciples in Mark 8:34, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* We are unsure if the nine disciples were willing to deny their pride through sincere prayer and repentance.

We have no clue about where they had been and what they had been doing while Jesus and the three disciples were gone by themselves. However, something unexpected happened in the meantime. A man came anxiously looking for Jesus because his son had been suffering from epileptic seizures, which he considered a demon possession. He came where the nine disciples were, hoping to ask Jesus to heal his son. But to his disappointment, Jesus was not around. Desperate, the man asked the nine disciples if they could help his son. Some of the nine disciples might have tried to cast the demon out of the young boy, and their multiple attempts failed one after another. To make matters worse, the teachers of the law, who were always critical of Jesus and his disciples, came and ridiculed them. And they got into an argument. It was an ugly clash of pride on both sides. However, the crowds were excited to see what was going on. (Pic#1a) Now, when they saw Jesus, they were excited even more.

Look at verses 16-18. “Jesus asked his disciples, ‘What are you arguing with them about?’ A man in the crowd answered, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.’” The Father’s description of the boy’s epileptic symptoms is scary. Of course, the boy wasn’t always showing the symptoms. Yet, once an unknown spirit or power triggered the boy, he was out of control, being knocked out, foaming at the mouth, gnashing his teeth, and having a rigid body like dry tree branches. I am sure the boys’ father was helpless. I am sure the boy wasn’t showing symptoms when his father described his horrifying episodes. Yet, everyone, including the boy, became scared to hear the father’s explanation.

 Listening to the father’s explanation, Jesus responded in verse 19. Look at verse 19. “*‘You unbelieving generation,’ Jesus replied, ‘how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.’”* We are not sure exactly to whom Jesus was addressing his comment. He might be speaking to his disciples who failed to drive out the evil spirit or to the teachers of the law who were criticizing and arguing with the disciples. Most likely, Jesus might be saying to the whole group of people, his disciples, the teachers of the law, the boy’s father, and even the crowds, when he said, “You unbelieving generation.” Even though it sounded like rebuking, it wasn’t.
Jesus was sharing his view of the problem of humankind. Jesus said, “You unbelieving generation,” because he saw the brokenness of fallen humanity in the epileptic boy and the response to the problem. In other words, Jesus saw how humans had lost our faith, which is the core foundation of our life. When we lose our trust or confidence, it’s a matter of time before we are destroyed. The nature of fear and unbelief is self-destructive. Jesus was deeply moved to see how the evil power was beating not just the little boy but so many people through unbelief. So, he was lamenting when he said, “You unbelieving generation!”

It reminds us of 1 John 3:8, which states, “The one who does what is sinful is of the devil. Because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” Hebrews 2:14-15 also states, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

So, when Jesus said, “How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” he highlighted that he came to restore the foundation of human life through faith in him. It’s good news for everyone that through our faith in Jesus, we can be restored from slaves of fear into confident children of God. (pic#2 & 3) God did not give us the spirit of fear but the spirit of power, love, and self-discipline (2 Tim 1:7)

Feeling deep compassion for the boy, Jesus said to them, “Bring the boy to me!” Look at verse 20. “So, they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.” The boy was having epileptic seizures again, precisely as the father described. But we notice that while the boy had terrible episodes, Jesus didn’t try to cast out the evil spirit immediately. Instead, he asked the child’s father a question in verse 21. “*‘How long has he been like this?”* The boy’s father answered, *“From childhood,”* he answered.

 We wonder why Jesus asked the father, *“How long has he been like this?”* instead of hurrying to heal the boy right away? It’s something we should think about. The father answered, “From his childhood.” It was possible that the boy could’ve experienced some emotionally and psychologically traumatic events that could have been related to demon possession. We don’t know precisely what happened to the boy. Yet, Jesus’ question, “*How long has he been like this?”* seems to suggest that our human condition, as that of this boy in the passage, has to do with what has happened in our past, especially in our childhood.

 The father continued to describe the pattern of his son’s highly horrible symptoms in the following verse. Look at verse 22. *“It has often thrown him into the fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”*  The boy could have been seriously burnt by fire or have almost drowned. The child’s father must have been highly distressed and constantly worried about his son, even when he showed no sign of convulsion. The Father was profoundly discouraged and said, *“Teacher, if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”* (22) The father’s confession was heartbreaking. It was a kind of deep secret that he might not have wanted to share with anybody due to social stigma.

Surprisingly, he now shares it with Jesus in earshot of so many people. It’s possible that Jesus allowed the father to share his story because it’s like a case study for his disciples, who should care for human souls as shepherds, pastors, missionaries, caregivers, counselors, and Bible teachers. We generally focus on the boy’s epileptic symptoms and ignore the father’s deep wounds and pains. But we see that Jesus paid attention to the father before healing the boy. We see here that the boy’s father had a lot of wounds and pains in his heart. The boy’s father could have spent all his wealth and energy to cure his son. Yet, his son didn’t get better. He could have lost his hope and confidence as a father because of his troubled childhood. He could not share his deep agony with anybody because of the sense of shame. His dream of having a wonderful family with his son seemed utterly shattered.

Now, what was he left with? All he could say to Jesus was, *“If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”* We can often identify ourselves with this father. Constant failures discourage us, and we lose our confidence in God and become pessimistic.

 How did Jesus challenge the father? Look at verse 23. “‘If you can?’ said Jesus, ‘Everything is possible for one who believes.’” Again, Jesus challenged his father to have faith before healing the boy. By saying, **“Everything is possible for one who believes,”** Jesus pointed out that the father’s real problem was not his troubled son but his unbelief. Even though we might have many serious problems around us, the core of our problems is our unbelief problem. Jesus said, “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

What did Jesus mean when he said, “Everything is possible for one who believes.”? Here, Jesus talks about faith. What is faith? What does it mean to live by faith? There are various definitions of faith. One of the most popular definitions of faith is Hebrews 11:1, which states, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

Whether the object of your faith is God or someone else, the character of faith is being confident or being sure and certain. If we are unsure of what we hope for or the unseen future, that’s not faith. The nature of faith is confidence and assurance. But the boy’s father lacked faith despite wanting his son healed. The father immediately sensed his unbelief and responded, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

Parents with growing children often focus on their children’s problems, not their unbelief. What parents need is faith besides love. Interestingly, Jesus first healed the father’s unbelief before healing the boy. ***“Anxious Parents Create Anxious Children***.” (Medical News Today) (Pic#4)

 Look at verses 25-28. “When Jesus saw a crowd running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit, saying, ‘You deaf and mute spirit.’ He said, ‘I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.’ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently, and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, ‘He’s dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.” It was a scary moment. People thought that the boy was dead. But he wasn’t finished. He was only exhausted due to the violent attack of the evil spirit. The evil spirit finally left the boy. And the boy turned to normal. Hurray! Praise the Lord! And the story continues in the following verses.

 Look at verses 28-29. “After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why couldn’t we drive out?’ He replied, ‘This kind can come out only by prayer.’” It seems that Jesus rebuked his disciples for their lack of prayer. According to the footnote, Jesus said, “This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.” Based on this verse, many of us are inspired to pray and even fast more and more so that we can be spiritually powerful enough to drive out demons. But that’s misleading.

Interestingly, while Jesus dealt with the devil in today’s passage, he didn’t utter even one prayer. Of course, Jesus is God, so he might not need to pray. Or he might have prayed silently. However, according to the context, the main subject of Jesus’ concern in the event was not prayer. The main subject was faith. He said, “You unbelieving generation!” (19) and “If you can? Everything is possible for one who believers.” (23) In Matthew 17:14-21, which is identical to today’s passage, Jesus didn’t mention prayer at all. He said to them, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to the mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.’” (17:20-21)

Then why did Mark mention prayer here? It’s because faith and prayer are inseparable. In other words, prayer without faith is ineffective, no matter how long, how often we pray, or even fast. James 1:5-8 gives us a great insight regarding faith and prayer. *“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”*

 Let me close my sermon. The evil spirit is a destructive power and destructive energy. Notably, the nature of fear is self-destructive. So many people are being destroyed because of dark and harmful energy or spirit. In today’s passage, we see that no matter how diabolic or terrible a situation is, we need absolute confidence and trust in our Lord Jesus Christ. Overcoming doubt or fear is not easy and is a never-ending struggle. Anxiety, fear, and doubt are like our polluted spiritual air. We need to filter them out as we struggle to pray. Apostle Paul gives us excellent tips on overcoming doubt, fear, and anxiety. He said in Philippians 4:6 and 7, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* We learn three closely related things: faith, prayer, and peace.

Jesus often told his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and also trust in me.” (Jn. 14:1; NLT) The peace of God is the powerful demonstration of God’s living presence in us. However, the goal of our faith is not just to overcome difficulties and have peace in this world. The purpose of our faith is to obtain the wholeness of God. Getting the wholeness of God may not be instant but a lifelong process of our faith. Romans 8:29-30 states, “For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

Our life in the world is full of troubles. But faith in Jesus is the answer and victory. No matter what circumstances we may be in, we need to learn to trust in God. The wholeness of God is not far away from us. It’s available whenever we decide to trust him. May we not allow our hearts to be troubled. Let us not forget to turn on the switch of the Wi-Fi of our faith and exercise our faith in Jesus, who is trustworthy and with us now and forever.