

49 Mark 9:14-29

Christ at the Center

Text

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. 15 And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. 16 And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" 17 And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 18 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." 19 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." 20 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. 21 And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 22 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." 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." 26 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." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. 28 And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" 29 And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Meeting with God and Engaging the World

Moses, in the first exodus ascends the mountain to meet with God and descends to find a faithless generation. Continuing the similarities to the first Exodus and Moses' Sinai experience, Jesus also descends to find a faithless generation.

While this certainly echos the first Sinai experience, I believe that this also fits into a broader theme. We have already mentioned that Moses met with God in a mountain-top experience to then meet with a faithless generation. Elijah also comes from his 40 days on Horeb, the mountain of God, to contend with Ahab and Jezebel. Jesus after God speaks to him from heaven affirming his love for him, is driven into the wilderness to contend with Satan. And now, coming from another experience with the Father, Jesus descends to contend with the demonic realm and the faithlessness of Israel.

Dear friends, this is the model of church life as well. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect." When we gather as a body we gather to meet with God. We come to "innumerable angels in festal gathering." This is a time of refreshment. This is a time of worship. This is a time of experiencing the love of God, this is a time of equipping, this is a time of preparation. If done well, our response will be like that of Peter, "Let us build three tents!" We want to stay here, it is so nice. Let us just bask in your presence and in the fellowship of your saints! Let us dwell with those who are being sanctified. But it cannot be so. In short order we are driven into the wilderness to contend with Satan. In short order we descend mount Zion to find a faithless generation. We meet with God and then we are called upon to engage the world. We are fed and our wounds are bandaged and our swords are sharpened and then we are sent back into the world. We meet with the saints and we share our struggles, convey our battles, exchange strategies and encourage one another, and then it is back into the world to spread the kingdom of God.

The Presence of the Master

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. 15 And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him.

"They," meaning Jesus and his three disciples came to the other nine disciples. The Scribes are found to be arguing with them. Have these men nothing better to do than to continually pester Jesus and his disciples? They are constantly trying to find something with which they can accuse him. They continually try to find dirt on Jesus or his disciples. This is their lucky day. Jesus is gone with Peter, James, and John and the remaining 9 must now serve as his representatives. A man comes up to them seeking help with the demon possession of his son. To their credit the disciples do try to help this poor man, but they are unable.

The scribes pounce on that opportunity. The disciples are unable to cast out the demon and the Scribes begin to ridicule them and make much of this embarrassing situation for the 9. A crowd has gathered for this argument as these ancient professors make a mockery of the 9 disciples. Everyone is so engrossed in this debate and drama that Jesus and the three approach unnoticed. When everyone sees Jesus they are greatly amazed. This is kind of like some punk kids harassing a bear cub, kicking it, throwing stones at it, laughing in derision when they all of a sudden turn around and find the mother bear right there! His presence probably frightened the Scribes, relieved the disciples and excited the crowd. The master is here!

Never the less, the disciples were expected to act on behalf of their master when he was not present, and in this case they failed to exercise the level of faith and prayer necessary to cast out the demon. As a result the father begins to doubt Jesus' ability. His disciples could not do it. Maybe my boy is beyond any help, maybe Jesus will not be able to help either. Thus his statement, "if you can."

We need to understand that we too are disciples of Christ. We are his body, and we are expected to act on his behalf in his absence. How are we doing? God expects this of us. We are described as ambassadors - people who have the authority to speak on behalf of the king. The world expects us to represent Christ. They intuitively recognize that if someone claims to be a follower of Christ we should expect some level of conformity to the life he lived. Again I ask, how are we

doing? On the whole I'd not say not very well. How about as a local body? How about as a family? How about as an individual. When we interact with our family and our coworkers, do they feel the touch of Christ?

16 And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" 17 And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 18 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."

Jesus wastes no time and directly asks the Scribes, "what were you arguing about with them" (meaning with his disciples). There may have been a pause as they struggle to find the words. Here they are ridiculing the disciples for trying to help a man. Before they can speak, however, a man runs from the crowd and relays to Jesus his plight and the plight of his son and the disciples inability to cast the demon out.

Some liberal scholars have suggested that the boy merely had epilepsy and these ancients confused it with demon possession. Indeed, there are remarkable similarities, and perhaps the boy did have *grand mal* epilepsy, but that is not where his troubles end. As with other demon possessions, the demons have a certain control over a person's body. They can run and attack, and even utilize a person's vocal chords. Whether or not the boy had epilepsy is beside the point because the demon seemed to have the ability to trigger this at will. You will notice that it was when he saw Jesus that this demon threw him into convulsions. It has, in times past, tried to kill the boy by sending him into these convulsions around fire and water.

19 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."

It is hard to know just who this is addressed to. Some suggest that it is addressed to the disciples for their lack of faith and lack of prayer. I think they are part of it, but this could be directed at everybody. The Scribes certainly fall under this condemnation. The disciples failure reflects that they do not yet lean on God as they should. The man struggles to believe that Jesus can cast out the demon. The miracle seeking crowd is only after the next great thing without any regard for the soul.

Jesus laments the faithlessness of this generation and then calls for the boy to be brought to him.

20 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. 21 And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 22 And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him."

As the boy is brought to Christ, the demons sees Jesus, recognizing him for who he is and in desperation throws the boy into convulsions.

Moved by the plight of this boy Jesus asks his father how long he has been like this. This question is not for information, but to highlight the seriousness of it. When the father reflects on how long this has been going on, and as he remembers the many near death horrors of this possession, he will glorify God all the more for the deliverance that will soon take place.

I think that we can find a lesson here for our own lives. George Santana has said "Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it." I think there is much wisdom in that.

Learning from the past is an excellent thing to do. However, if the chief end of man is to glorify

God and enjoy him forever, then there more to our reflection on the past than merely avoiding future mistakes. Our sanctification and God's glorification flow nicely from thoughtful reflection of who we were, where we have come, and what God has done.

Israel was commanded to set up stones as a remembrance of where they had come from.

The Importance of Faith

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!”

Who here, as a genuine believer, cannot identify with this man? Praise God that he does not require perfect faith. This man believes but also recognizes that this belief is mixed with fear, tainted by the disciples inability, questions of his worthiness, all wrapped up in his fallen finitude. It is a belief, but it is not a pure, untainted, joy-filled, unwaveringly confident faith. As long as Christ, and only Christ, is the content of our faith, God is pleased to work.

It is not a matter of question whether he can. Jesus has done this and much more before. No, there is no question of whether he is able. Jesus wants to make a point of it. He has abundantly demonstrated his ability and he wants to move the conversation toward faith in his compassion and ability. Jesus is not principally about doing great deeds to wow people. Jesus is not about doing miracle to attract or entertain people, what a horrible misunderstanding that is. Jesus is not even about doing miracle principally for helping people's physical needs. They have a meaning of their own, both individually and a class of events that I will not review here.

Jesus allowed the hemorrhaging woman to be healed but would not let her depart until she knew that faith was the key. From the faith of the lame man Jesus forgave his sins and then healed him as a demonstration of his authority. Here too Jesus makes faith the topic. He wants this man, and all standing around him, to know that faith is the key.

Hendrickson notes the contrast between the lepers plea, "if you will, you can" and this mans, "if you can." The leper believed in the power of Christ, and for him it was only a matter of if Christ was willing. There is so much emphasis in the life of Christ and in the NT at large on faith. This faith is not something that we conjure up, nor is it some ethereal reality of its own. It is a faith in something - Jesus Christ.

We need to be striving to increase our faith. It is a kin to the faith you have in a friend, or in your spouse. When you first are married, there is a faith that she will never cheat on you. But you cannot simply increase that faith by conjuring up more faith from within yourself. The increase in faith comes as a result of knowing in an even deeper way the person in whom you have faith. We spend time with that person, real time. There are no shortcuts here. You can't simply co-habitate and think that since you have spent 10 years in marriage that you have good reason for an increased faith in that person. This is not to say they are not trustworthy, but you can't know that without. As you go through difficulties together, as you have some fights, as you spend good time talking about real things, then your faith will increase.

The same is true in your spiritual walk. You can believe certain basic things about God and have a certain amount of faith. But to really increase it you must spend time with him. This means, primarily, time in the word. It is in the pages of scripture that He is revealed to us. We therefore

need to read it every day, read it for fun. Read it for study. Read it for developing a worldview. Read it for sanctification. Read it because in it you see the face of God. Increasing your faith also means spending time with God in prayer. This is not a means of revelation, so we need to be careful about what we take away from it. However, you cannot be faithful and be slack in prayer. You may not receive new revelation, but in prayer you experience God and commune with him. Through these two disciplines your faith will increase because you know your Savior all the better.

Abiding in God

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." 26 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." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

We see here the compassion of our Savior. So many times before he reaches out to touch those to whom he ministers. From leading the blind man by the hand to touching the leper to cleanse him to raising Jairus' daughter to lifting Peter's mother and many more, our Lord is always touching people. This is especially noticeable when many of the people he touched were ceremonially unclean. This was a huge no no for any Rabbi. The leaders of the day missed so much of the law, not the letter, but the spirit. Circumcision was to represent their heart. Their separateness was to be spiritual. We need to be willing to get our hands dirty, both literally and metaphorically, in ministry to others.

"In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord."

28 And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" 29 And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

The disciples cannot understand why they could not cast out the demon. They had been able to do it earlier, but they found that they had not the ability this last time. But that is exactly their problem. They never had the ability, not in themselves. Their ability is derived, not innate. They must lean on God who does have authority over the demonic realm. They must abide in him, for only in him do they have any power or any authority.