

¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

¹⁶ “What are you arguing with them about?” he asked.

¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ 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.”

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.”

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.

²¹ Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. ²² “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

²³ ““If you can?”” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

²⁴ Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

²⁹ He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer

-- Mark 9:14-29

I can't believe they missed it.

All those years of sitting in Sunday Schools with teachers following David C. Cook Curriculums, and every single teacher missed out on this story. Now I've heard David and Goliath told at least a million times, and I've done crossword puzzles for everyone from Adam to Zechariah. But as far as I can tell, no Sunday School teacher ever told me the story of the man who half-believed that Jesus could do something. If they taught this story at all, they made sure to remind me that certain kinds of demons will come out only by prayer and fasting. Though I'm sure my teachers said it nicely, the meaning of this passage was interpreted in my mind as "*you bad little boy—you'd better pray and fast even more.*"

They did their best, I guess. But I wonder how different my life in the Church would have been if there had been less emphasis on perfect role models and praying and fasting to get God to do something miraculous. Maybe my Sunday School teachers knew about the skeptics and half-believers, but they were never held up as people of importance. They, like most adults, were more concerned that I get to believing and stop asking so many questions. I wish now that they would have put more weight on the people all around who wouldn't quite make it into a book of All-Time Best Believers, because these are the people who believe, but need help with their unbelief—just like you and me.

It wasn't until sometime in seminary that I started seeing that the Bible narrative doesn't feature many people who believe all the way. There's Enoch in the early goings, but we don't know much about him except that he walked with God and then God mysteriously took him away. Maybe Joshua or Elisha fits the bill, but aside from these two, Jesus was the only figure in the great story who came out smelling like roses—and even then, he came out a whole lot angrier and sadder than I

had been taught. And there were moments, most notably when Jesus was on his knees in Gethsemane, that even the Christ sounds like he's not sure of what happens next.

Mark 9 grabbed my attention years ago and hasn't yet let go because the cry of the father begging for the life of his child is the cry of my heart every single morning: *I believe; help my unbelief*. And I don't think I'm the only one here who would say that. Maybe I really am alone in this, but I don't think so. We are *all* part-way believers, struggling as much with the things we don't believe in as much as we are strengthened by the things we do.

The scene opens with Jesus and the Big Three coming down off the mountain with Jesus toweling off his freshly-shining divinity. It's on the mountain that as Jesus stands before Peter, James and John blazing with heavenly light, Peter blurts out in fear and awe "*this is great! Let's build a shelter for you and the other two guys—Elijah and Moses.*" Yet as soon as he says it, a cloud comes down and covers Jesus and the two men representing the Law and the Prophets, and when the cloud goes, Jesus is standing alone not glowing anymore.

What Peter said wasn't necessarily sinful—it was just a little stupid. But we can forgive him, because it's almost guaranteed that if you and I were standing where he stood and had the full force of godhood bearing down on us, we too might squeak out something like "*My Lord and My God! Uh—want to stay for dinner?*" Then we'd go out and get a nice turkey with all the fixings or maybe a ham with pineapple rings, and we'd uncork that bottle of wine we were saving for that special occasion. We'd also call up our friends to come on over because Jesus Christ is here! But we might not call the people who'd embarrass us in front of the Master. You know, the girl who burps uncontrollably after the meal, or Uncle John who gets loud after a couple of drinks. Maybe our hands would hesitate to include their email addresses in the "cc" box. Maybe our fingers would pause before dialing their numbers. We'd start realizing that too many of our friends and family are

awkward. Life, we would think, was just so much simpler when it was just “me and Jesus” and all my favourite people. Our families, our friends, our workplaces—our churches—they’d all be so much better if we just had the “right kind” of people in them. Why did all the weirdoes and inconvenient people have to go and ruin them?

Jesus descends from the mountain with the Three in tow and immediately (one of Mark’s favourite words), they’re met with the somewhat comical scene of the other nine disciples arguing with the Teachers of the Law. As the story goes on, the reason for the argument becomes clear: the disciples couldn’t cast out the demon from a boy whose father had shown up looking for Jesus, and the lawyers jumped all over them for it. You can almost hear Peter groan as Jesus is rushed by the crowd and the struggle resumes: *“See, Lord, this is exactly why we should have stayed on the mountain! Up there, it was just you, me, and the two greatest Jews of all time. Oh yeah, and James and John. Down here, you’ve got nine incompetent disciples and all the rest of these religious lawyers mixing it up over one little kid. Up there, it was peaceful and perfect. Down here, it’s a mess.”*

Jesus doesn’t seem to share Peter’s reservations and gets stuck right in. That’s one of the most annoying things about Jesus—he tends to go where you don’t want to, down off the mountain and into our mess. He hears the father out and sighs, *“Oh, c’mon! Really? You don’t get it yet?”* It’s a word that no matter how I read it still makes me somewhat ashamed because I’ve been Christian a long time and I *still* don’t always get it—nor will I probably ever, at least on this side of death. It’s important to note here that when Jesus laments this “unbelieving generation”, he’s not necessarily talking about everyone in the world at this time, because the Greek word “genea” can also mean the group of people standing in front of you. And to the people arguing in front of him, Jesus rolls his eyes because in all the kerfuffle over who could do what, the father and his son are forgotten. Even

more, what little faith the dad had gets squashed as he encounters Jesus' disciples. You almost want to read this passage with circus music playing in the background.

But the dad still has a glimmer of faith; enough to ask "*if you can do anything, please help us!*"

Though the text doesn't say so, you can almost imagine Jesus' eyes going soft and that strange, tender smile crossing his face as he sees through the crowd (like he always does) and has his heart moved with compassion. "*If you can?*" Jesus says. "*Everything is possible for the one who believes.*"

This is the sort of discomfiting statement that pastors and theologians love to pick over because it's such a general statement. Paul, the replacement apostle, is a lot more specific in saying things like "believe in Jesus", but here, Jesus doesn't seem to want to draw attention to himself. It sounds as though he's advocating some sort of general spiritual belief, a sort of Oprah-istic "*just believe and it'll come to you*" thing that Christians everywhere get itchy thinking about. And if we took verse 23 out of context we would certainly have cause to think that Jesus isn't so concerned about trusting and believing in him as he is with just generally believing that good things come to those who think good thoughts. But that's *not* what Jesus is about. Remember, this is the same guy who, in other places, says things like "*come to me all you weary and weighed-down*"¹ and "*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*"² He's not going to reverse course and say "*hey, just stay positive and believe in yourself.*"

What you need to see is that with the little mustard seed of faith that the father has, he approaches Jesus. He *already* trusts him a little, but the invitation to belief that Jesus extends to him is an invitation to believe all the more. It's in the context of a *relationship*, even if it's just the first meeting, that Jesus says "have more faith." The problem with so much of the spiritual babble going

¹ Matt 11:28

² John 14:6

around is that talk show hosts and professional athletes all brag about having “faith”, but faith by definition means having faith in someone or something. Here, Jesus invites the man to stop dipping his toe into the lake and jump in to having faith in the one they would eventually call the Christ.

The man says, “*I believe—help my unbelief!*”

As I go longer in my journey with Jesus, this is the statement that makes more and more sense. Most of the time, I’ve got less than a mustard seed of faith³ in Jesus and a lot more faith in myself—in my abilities, in my body, in my bank account. It’s only when the things I usually put my trust in get stripped away that I’m forced to rely on the one who’s been sustaining me all along. Anyone who’s ever reached rock bottom in resources knows this feeling. Anyone who has their world turned upside down and inside out knows they were helpless all this time. It’s we who bring our desperation to Jesus and say “*I believe, help my unbelief!*”

Too often, we characterize faith as this huge leap across some bottomless chasm. Let this passage stand as witness against that kind of thinking, because the dad doesn’t have it in him to be a hero of the faith. He believes, but only part-way. Yet Jesus seizes on that scrap of trust as though to demonstrate how little faith it takes to get God’s attention. Turns out, it doesn’t take much. If we pray as the desperate dad prayed: “*help my unbelief!*”—we admit to not quite trusting God but still wanting to trust him more. This may not sound like a dangerous prayer, but it is, because the more we ask to trust God, the more he will give us to trust him with.

It wasn’t all that long ago that I prayed as that man did—“*I believe, help my unbelief.*” I was sort of hoping at the time that God would somehow enhance my senses so that I’d see chariots of fire in the hills or legions of angels walking around. It’s what you pray when the future looks bleak and you’re caught between a rock and, well, another rock. Did God answer me? It’s too soon to tell. But

³ cf. Matt 17:20, Luke 17:6

if you were to ask me whether my faith in Christ is complete, I don't think I can say it is. My answer would still be, *"I believe; help my unbelief."* This isn't because I'm faithless or a bad Christian. First of all, there really aren't any "good Christians", just bad ones. And second, I've long since learned that the place where God meets us most is when we spread our empty hands and admit to him *"I got bupkis. Help my unbelief."*

You know the rest of the story: the demon comes out of the boy and the father goes away with a whole lot more faith than he had coming in. The disciples scratch their heads at their inability because after all, weren't they the ones who had cast out demons on their short term mission trip just three chapters ago? Jesus' reply—or at least the one I learned in Sunday School—doesn't help things. *"This kind can only come out by prayer and fasting."*

Welcome to textual criticism, NIV circa 1978—the word "fasting" doesn't appear in the most reliable ancient manuscripts. So then, if Jesus says this kind can only come out by prayer by itself, what does he mean? He means what he has always meant—that nothing can be accomplished outside of his provision and authority, outside of relationship. Prayer—real prayer that gets God's attention—is the act of a dependent person who knows they have no other place to go. God doesn't pay much attention to would-be exorcists who swagger up to possessed boys and crack their knuckles saying *"I got this."* Who gave the disciples authority three chapters earlier? Jesus did, and it appears as though by Mark 9 they might have forgotten that. What kind of demon can only come out by prayer? Every demon. Unless we learn to express our dependence on God in everything, demons are not cast out, the blind still don't see, the lame still don't walk, and the dead still stay dead. This is perhaps why the disciples failed to do as they had done before. They might have had their first taste of success, only to forget where the power and authority for this Kingdom work was coming from.

This is the mess that greets Jesus as he comes down off the mountain: a bunch of disciples who have forgotten where the authority for Kingdom work comes from, a cadre of nitpicking religious professionals, and a man whose faith shrinks in the face of everyone who seeks to get in his way of coming to Jesus for healing. It's a mess down here, but that's where you'll always meet Jesus.

This is often how church communities go. They're a lot messier than you expect. Most people show up at our doors hoping to meet the real Jesus, but often, our arrogance in thinking we know how to "do church" and "be community" interferes with the claims Jesus might be making on people's lives. Some churches do a good job in keeping people from actually meeting Jesus because they're busy trying to get it done on their own without him. It's a cliché to say so, but as much as church communities are places where faith is born and nurtured, they can also be dangerous places where faith is tortured and buried. The question isn't whether we will have our innocence tested and naiveté taken away by the difficulty of community. The question is whether we will persevere with what little faith we have and see into a crowd of stumbling disciples to behold the image of Christ holding out his wounded arms in welcome.

- 1.) Where are you having the most trouble trusting God?
- 2.) How is God meeting you in your disbelief?