

"O Faithless Generation"

Has your faith ever faltered? Have you ever had any doubts about your faith? Well, if we are honest with ourselves, I think we can all say yes. Our faith is often lacking. This can quite commonly come during a difficult trial in our life, but our faith can also be lacking during the ordinary times of life too.

In our passage for today, we see Jesus cry out, "O faithless generation!" Those words were especially directed toward the disciples, but they obviously apply to all humanity. And in our passage, that is what we see. We see a number of groups of people and all of them show a lacking faith in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ. And so as we look at this passage, we'll see how Jesus not only heals a demon-possessed boy, conquering the demon in this boy, but we'll see how he also conquers unbelief in our lives. And so let's look at how Jesus confronts unbelief in this passage.

Look with me first at the setting of our passage. Jesus had just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John. In verse 14, he reunites with the nine remaining disciples and finds them with a large crowd and with some scribes. As we read on in the passage, it seems that a man had brought his son to be healed by Jesus, but evidently finds only the nine disciples and decides to present the boy to them for healing. Remember that the disciples back in chapter 6 had already been sent on a mission commissioned by Jesus that included the successful casting out of many demons. Besides this, it was a quite common notion at that time to assume that one's disciples came with the same power and authority as their teacher. So, understandably the father had hoped that Jesus' disciples could help his son. But, according to verse 18, the disciples could not. They had tried and failed to free the son from the demon.

And when Jesus shows up, he finds these nine disciples arguing with the scribes. The scribes were probably giving the disciples a hard time for not being able to heal the boy, and probably used it as an opportunity to criticize Jesus. The scribes were probably engaging in some mature form of taunting and ridiculing the disciples - "So your Jesus' disciples, eh? He's really taught you guys well, huh? Oh, I'm sure he could help out if he was here." Of course, I'm speculating a bit on their exact conversation, but knowing the scribes, I'd expect this argument had something to do with trying to shake the disciples' confidence in Jesus.

Now of course, it goes without saying that the scribes had a lacking faith in Jesus. But as we continue to look at this passage, it shows that these nine disciples also had the same problem of a lacking faith. These disciples had a lacking faith, and that is fundamentally why they could not cast out this demon. Jesus actually tells the disciples that explicitly in Matthew's account of this event -- Matthew 17:20. That's pretty much what we see in Mark's account as well. In verse 19, after the father explains the situation to Jesus, Jesus exclaims, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?" It seems pretty clear in the context that this rebuke is directed primarily to the disciples who had failed to cast out the demon. Their inability to cast out the demon showed a fundamental lack of faith in Jesus.

Jesus confirms that this is their problem at the end of the passage. In verse 28, the disciples come up to him and directly ask them why they couldn't cast out the demon. It's at that point when Matthew's account records Jesus pointing to

disciples' lack of faith. But in Mark's account, Jesus presents the issue in terms of their need for prayer. Fundamentally, these are related issues. Prayer is an expression of faith. But neither prayer nor faith in themselves are some magical means for an exorcism. Both faith and prayer are looking toward God. The disciples needed to have faith in God that God could heal this boy. That sort of faith would have rightly been expressed through a prayer to God. Both faith and prayer are looking to God. God is the object of faith and God is the recipient of prayer. And so, the power to cast out demons is ultimately in God, faith expressed through prayer is just the *instrument* for exorcising demons, not the power itself. (By the way, our pew Bible's translation says "prayer and fasting" in verse 29. The words "and fasting" are actually not in the best earliest manuscripts, and were probably added into the manuscript tradition at some point, which is why all of the newest translations that actually use the oldest manuscripts do not include this reference to fasting.)

And so note the problems that Jesus has raised here. He called the disciples faithless in verse 19. He said that they didn't pray in verse 29. Both of these things suggest that the disciples had a lacking and misdirected faith when they tried to heal the son. They had already cast out many demons on their previous mission. Maybe now, when the opportunity presented itself to cast out another demon they had mistakenly thought that they had the power internally and individually to cast out demons. It does seem that this was their problem. They had lapsed in their faith in God for the power to exorcise demons. They seemed to place that power in themselves instead. That is what they ask in verse 28, "Why could we not cast it out?"

Jesus had left them alone for just a little bit while going up to the mountain for the transfiguration and they quickly faltered in their faith during that time. That's what Jesus' rebuke recognizes when he asks them how long he would be with them and how long he would bear with them. The disciples still needed Christ's discipling presence in their lives! Without him, they quickly faltered in faith.

But it is not just the scribes and the disciples who had a lacking faith in this passage. We quickly see that the father's faith was lacking as well. The father, like the disciples, obviously had some faith in Jesus. The father had brought the son to Jesus to be healed, verse 17. That was an act of faith. But his faith was also a lacking faith. Of course, his faith was probably not strengthened by the disciples' failed attempt to cast out the demon themselves. And so look at the father's dialogue with Jesus. After explaining to Jesus the problem with his son, the father says, "But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

"If you can do anything," the father says. That statement represents a lacking faith. Jesus calls the father on this in verse 23. Jesus picks up the same language from the father and turns it around to show the father's own lacking faith. Jesus then says, "All things are possible to him who believes." Jesus calls the father on his lacking faith and makes a grand promise to him - all things are possible to him who believes.

Jesus says something similar in chapter 10:27, when he says, "With God, all things are possible." So here, Jesus says "all things are possible to him who believes," and later he will say "With God, all things are possible." That's the key in understanding Jesus' promise to the father. It's not that faith in itself contains some power to grant any and every desire of our heart. It's faith in God that is the instrument for receiving any help. The power is in God, not faith by itself. Faith has power only in that it looks to the one with all power, God. So the faith Jesus is calling the father to, is a God-focused faith.

Let me give you an example to clarify what I am saying. Two weeks ago when I climbed Half Dome, on the final ascent you have to use the cables to help get up the side of the sharp incline of Half Dome. With the cables, it is completely possible to get to the top of Half Dome that way. Without the cables, it is not possible. So, I had to have faith to grab onto the cables and walk up the side of the mountain. And so in that situation, if I had faith, I could get to the top of Half Dome. It was not faith as a concept that enabled me to get up to the top of Half Dome. I didn't just believe I could get to the top. I believed *in the cables*. I believed that they could enable me to get to the top, and then I acted on that faith by trusting my life to those cables. So, yes, it was faith that made it possible to get to the top of Half Dome, but ultimately it was the cables that made it possible for me. It was faith in the cables. Faith always has an object.

Do you see the important nuance I am making? Jesus tells the father that if he believes, then all things are possible. He is not just telling the father to just have some vague virtue of faith. There's a song that goes "there can be miracles, if you believe;" I would disagree with that song's emphasis. Faith, for it to be effective, faith for it to experience miracles, is always and only if it is faith in God. Faith is only effective when it's faith in something, and in this case, Jesus is calling the person to have faith in God, and ultimately in himself as the Messiah who is God come in the flesh.

And of course, it's impossible to have faith without having faith in someone or something. There is no virtue of belief apart from belief in something. Jesus is calling the man to believe in him and in his ability to heal his son.

But the father got it. He understood Jesus' point, and he responded with desperation and genuineness. In verse 24 the father cries out, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

There's one other group that express some lack of faith in this passage as well - the crowds. In verse 15 they do seem to warmly welcome Jesus. They too had some faith. But when Jesus at first healed the boy, the boy appeared dead and the crowds are very quick to conclude that the boy had died. This is reminiscent of Jesus raising up Jairus' little daughter back in chapter 5. When Jairus was told that his daughter had died, Jesus instantly replied, "Do not be afraid, only believe." And that is what Jairus did, and he witnessed his daughter raised from the dead. The crowds here, instead, instantly doubt the success of Jesus' exorcism and conclude that the boy is now dead - verse 26. And so the crowds immediate doubt shows a lacking faith on their part as well.

My point is in all this, that this passage illustrates Jesus words in verse 19 - "Oh faithless generation." Everyone in this passage shows their lacking faith, the scribes, the disciples, the father, and even the crowds. All of this lacking faith stands in contrast to Jesus. Instead, Jesus throughout this passage shows his confident power. Jesus confidently acts throughout this passage to heal this son and ultimately to conquer unbelief. Just look at Jesus' actions in this passage.

Right from the start, Jesus shows that he is in control. Right when he shows up, he sees the disciples arguing with the scribes and he boldly interrupts and demands to know what the issue is. Then when he learns about the issue with the demon-possessed boy, he boldly commands that the son be brought to him, and inquires with his father about his condition. Even when the boy begins to do his epileptic like symptoms in front of him, Jesus does not panic.

Instead, Jesus proceeds to heal the boy, even in the face of all the unbelief. Think about each of the groups. In the face of the unbelief of the disciples, he rebukes them and later teaches them. In the face of the lacking faith of the father, he rebukes him and calls him to a greater faith. In the face of the conflict with the demon itself, he rebukes the demon as well, verse 25. And in the face of the unbelief by the crowd, he confidently touches the son and lifts him up, when everyone else thought he was dead. Remember that the law made someone ceremonially unclean for 7 days if you touched a dead body, so people didn't just do this lightly. And so in this whole situation, we see the opposite in Jesus. Everyone was responding in this situation with various levels of doubts and lacking faith, but Jesus instead is confidently administering his kingdom power throughout this affair.

And so Jesus shows his confident power here amidst unbelief. But this wasn't just a *confident* power, it was also a *conquering* power. It was a power that conquered this demon and also that conquered unbelief. For it was a power that drew people to a greater faith in Christ as they witnessed his power over the demon.

And so let's think a little further about Jesus' *conquering* power in this passage. Remember first the context. Jesus had just come off the Mount of Transfiguration in the previous passage with his three disciples. He arrives to find the other nine disciples engaged in some sort of unbelief. This of course is all too similar to Moses experience when he descended down from Mount Sinai, he found the people led by Aaron in worshipping a golden calf - an even greater sign of lacking faith! But it's at this point in Jesus' ministry, where we are reminded of his mission. He descends from the glory of the Mount of Transfiguration only to find sin and unbelief. He descends from this glory to return to a mission of suffering, suffering that will ultimately lead to the cross. But for now this mission of suffering involves once again a confrontation with Satan. Jesus comes down from glory to engage in another conflict with the devil.

And we find Satan doing what he is always trying to do: causing suffering, destruction, and even death. We see the demon constantly trying to throw this boy into the water or fire to kill him. The demon would cause the boy to thrash all around and foam at the mouth. This was not a pretty sight. And yet I think it's interesting how the demon is described by Jesus. Jesus calls the demon a mute and deaf spirit. I think that's interesting, because it's another reference by Jesus to the senses. The book of Mark has already touched on this theme of the senses quite a bit. In Mark we see Jesus healing people's physical senses: for example, the blind are made to see, the deaf are made to hear, and the mute are made to speak. But underlying these miracles are Jesus' comments that the people are spiritually blind, deaf, and mute. Jesus has shown repeatedly how the people are spiritually dull. For example, we seen in the past the disciples having this problem: having eyes, but not seeing, having ears but not hearing.

And so I don't think its mere coincidence that in a passage that highlights everyone's lacking faith, a condition which Jesus in the past has associated with a failing of the spiritual senses, that Jesus, casts out a demon and calls the demon a mute and deaf spirit. Now I'm sure Jesus called the demon this in one sense because that is what the demon was doing to this boy: he was causing the boy to be mute and deaf. But I think we have to see the relationship of this mute and deaf demon to the people. You see that's the issue: this mute and deaf spirit resembled the condition of all the people there. The boy may have been physically mute and deaf, but all the people there, with their lacking faith, were spiritually mute and deaf. And so as Jesus conquers the demon by casting him out, Jesus is also showing his power to cast out unbelief in the face of everyone's lacking faith. Jesus has the power to conquer demons and he has the power to conquer unbelief.

But look at how Jesus conquers the demon here. It was rather violent. Look at verse 26. The *mute* spirit cries out and convulses the boy terribly! Though the demon left the boy, what's the result to the boy: he appears dead. Mark's wording makes it pretty clear that he only appeared dead, and yet as I've already mentioned this whole scene is reminiscent of Jesus raising up Jarius's dead daughter who was really dead. And so Jesus touches the boy, and lifts him up. Even though Mark tells us that the boy only appeared dead, we can't miss how everything would have looked to the people - it looked like a resurrection. The boy was healed from this demon, only after a final suffering, and then a sort of resurrection. The boy was healed from this demon that resembled all the sin and unbelief of the people there. But he was healed, only after a final suffering and a sort of resurrection.

I hope you are beginning to see how this looks forward to the cross of Christ. What happens with the boy here foreshadows what will happen on the cross with Jesus. With the boy, Jesus begins to conquer Satan and unbelief, but that will ultimately happen on the cross. For it's on the cross where Jesus' mission of suffering comes to a climax. There Jesus will not only appear to meet death as he conquers Satan and sin. No, Jesus will meet death. He would die to pay the penalty for our sins. He would die that Satan would no longer afflict God's chosen people. He would die, and remain dead, until the third day, and then he would raise himself up again!

And so in Christ's death and resurrection, we are freed from Satan's tyranny. In his death and resurrection, we are restored and healed. But especially hear this: in his death and resurrection he secured the way for our faith to abound -- so that our faith would not be lacking. For on the cross, he reconciled us to God that God now freely sends his Holy Spirit to work faith inside us - as a gift! Yes, in this life, our faith will sometimes be lacking and falter, but may we look to Christ. Scripture confidently declares that Jesus is both the author and finisher of our faith! Jesus will bring our faith to completion! What happened with this demon-possessed boy is but a foreshadowing of how Christ would not only conquer Satan, but how he would also conquer unbelief through his death and resurrection. That is the mighty, confident, conquering power of Jesus. It is a power that casts out demons and a power that casts out unbelief!

Brothers and sisters, let's think a little bit about how to further apply this text to our lives. John Calvin commented on the father's words in verse 24 when the father said, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Calvin raised the question - is this a contradiction - "I believe, help my unbelief"? Calvin says certainly not - just look inside, it is the condition of us all. Who among us has faith that never has any doubts? Who among us has faith that never falters at some point? No, this is the reality for us all. Just think about some common examples where our faith might be lacking.

For example, what about your prayer life? James 1:9 says that when we pray we should ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. But is that always the case when we pray, that we never doubt in our prayers? Of course James isn't saying that we should have a faith that assumes we'll get anything and everything we pray for, but we should have a faith that God is more than able to give us whatever we ask of him. And so we should not pray, Lord, if you can, please answer this prayer. We should pray, Lord, if you will, please answer this prayer.

Another place where our faith often lacks is in the midst of a loss, say for example a financial loss or even a relationship loss. That sort of loss might cause you to lose all the financial or emotional stability in your life. But in

the midst of that sort of crisis, can your faith say along with Paul, "I count all things a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:8).

One final example: what about in the midst of a health trial? In that difficult time, do you have faith that Christ is really in control? Can then your faith say along with Paul, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain?"

These are just a few examples of where your faith might falter at times. But this passage reminds us that we are called to faith. Place your faith in the God of the heavens and the earth who has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Believe in Christ. Place your faith in him. We are called to faith. And this is not a call to just have some vague general faith as virtue. Nor are we to just have faith in an idea or a cause. Nor is this a call for faith in yourselves. This is a call for faith in the God-man, Jesus Christ. Believe in him. Jesus' cry, "O faithless generation" is a call for us all to flee to him in faith. Look to him as the one overcomes both sin and Satan's attack in our lives. And he is the one who grows our faith.

I think this passage especially speaks to the officers and leaders in the church. There is a special warning here to us who lead the church. People came to the disciples in our passage looking for leadership, looking to find the power of Christ, and instead they faltered in faith, likely discouraging the faith of the father who came to them. And so I speak to the elders and deacons of our church right now - May we never look to ourselves, to our own ingenuity, to find success in ministry. But may our success as officers of the church be grounded in our faith in Jesus Christ. For if our ministry is going to be successful, it will only be by Christ working through us. Our faith must look to Christ to lead through us. Our faith must be in him. This is certainly a message we need to hear and to be reminded of regularly.

But this call to faith is a call for everyone, not just the officers of the church. And so when you examine your faith, and you find it to be lacking, I would urge you to pray. That's what the disciples should have been doing in our passage when they tried to cast out the demon by their own strength. Don't try to live your Christian life by your own strength. If our faith is started and finished by Christ, why do we try to live the in between on our own? No, when we find our faith lacking, that's when we should pray all the more. Pray that Christ's conquering power would conquer the unbelief in your life. And so our passage today is calling us to have a faith that is expressed through prayer. A faith that finds more faith even through prayer. A faith that looks to Christ as both its object and even its source. Believe in Christ.

I think of the three disciples who came down with Jesus from the Mount of Transfiguration. They witnessed all these events unfold. They saw everyone's lacking faith in this affair. But we don't really hear anything about them in this passage. They are but the assumed bystanders observing what's going on. While everyone in this passage is affected by faltering faith, surely their eyes must have still been searing with the transfiguration glory of Christ. While everyone else stood around lacking in faith, the glory of Christ that still shone in their minds must have encouraged the faith of Peter, James, and John. And if that's the case, how can we not be encouraged in our faith. For we have received the manifold witness of Christ and his glory. We have received the testimony of the transfiguration. We have received the eye-witness reports of Christ's resurrection and ascension. We have received all the Scriptures that have testified to Christ's coming. We have seen his glory. May we too be encouraged in our faith.

Let me end with one final encouragement. In verse 19, Jesus cried out, "How long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?" That seemingly rhetorical question was later answered by Jesus. Forever. He says "forever"! In the Great Commission, even as Jesus left the disciples and ascended up into heaven, Jesus said that he would always be with us, even to the end of the age. Indeed Jesus is always with us through Holy Spirit. And he is always teaching us, through his Holy Spirit. And if he is with us until the end, then he will surely uphold and grow our faith. To him be the glory. Amen.

Copyright © 2008 Rev. W. Reid Hankins, M.Div.
All Rights Reserved.