

ASK THE KING

Mark 9:14-32, Deuteronomy 8:11-20

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Jesus said, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." (Mark 9:29 ESV)

Take a moment to write down all the kinds that **can** be driven out without prayer. Seriously, what in the world was Jesus talking about? It feels like wizards' school (Hogwarts?) and the Professor is explaining the taxonomy of demons: "Level 1 demons come out with a flick of the wand. Level 2 demons come out with eye of newt..."

But Jesus is no wizard, nor does he call us to wizardry as his disciples. As modern people, we're inclined to see the disciples' problem as a lack of *knowledge*, as if they had forgotten the Latin words to cast out a "Level 5 Epilepsy Goblin." (And of course the best wizards are those who *know* the most.) But Jesus identifies the problem as something completely different, a problem not of the head, but of the heart. As we'll see in this passage, the disciples failed for lack of relationship, rather than lack of knowledge.

EXCURSUS ON DEMONS

Since Mark 9:14-29 is an exorcism, let's begin by considering the existence of demons. In the previous episode in Mark's Gospel, we discovered that the disciples saw Jesus through blurry lenses rather than seeing him clearly. When it comes to demons, I'm afraid we have the same problem.

When I was in school, my favorite professor was a *medical* oncologist. He worked on the cancer ward at the university hospital with a team of radiation oncologists and surgeons, all of them brilliant scientists and professors as well as physicians. What I found surprising was how often they disagreed about how to care for their patients, and how predictable their disagreements were. By and large, the surgeons wanted to operate, the medical oncologists wanted to try chemotherapy, and of course the radiation oncologists wanted to zap everything. Because of their specializations, they all saw their patients through blurry lenses.

Most all of us have had the benefit of a western education, and that's the lens through which we see the world. Consequently, we *know* that only primitive peoples believe in demons. Mark 9 describes a demon-possessed boy, and yet we *know* that seizures and grinding of the teeth and foaming at the mouth are epilepsy. (In fact, Matthew calls it "epilepsy" in his Gospel.) As

westerners, we *know* that this boy had a problem with his neurotransmitters, and that 7 out of 10 people who take Tegretol™ as recommended will be able to control their seizures.

Yet our knowledge remains incomplete. Medical researchers still don't understand epilepsy. There's no cure—only medications to manage the symptoms, often with unfortunate side effects. Beyond the limits of what we *know*, isn't it possible that there's more than neurochemistry involved in this boy's problems?

Over and over again in this story, we are told that the boy's problem was caused by an evil spirit. Not only so, but also over in Matthew's Gospel, where he used the word "epilepsy" to describe the boy's symptoms, he also says very clearly that the *cause* of the problem was demonic. Here in Mark 9, the boy's symptoms are described in vivid detail four times throughout the account, revealing more than run-of-the-mill epilepsy. Not only were there seizures, but the boy was also mute and deaf, and consistently self-destructive, throwing himself into fire or water. And perhaps the most telling sign is in verse 20—something we've seen previously in Mark's Gospel:

When the spirit saw him [Jesus], immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. (Mark 9:20)

In other words, the presence of Jesus caused this evil spirit to raise its head. The root cause was revealed in the light of Christ.

Note that the passage did *not* say that every case of epilepsy is caused by demons. Only in this particular instance the root cause was demonic. Jesus healed the sick throughout the Gospels, sometimes he also cast out demons. Not every illness in the Gospels has a demonic origin.

So who's right? Primitive people like Mark and Matthew and Jesus, who believed that some of the brokenness of the world was caused by demons? Or moderns like us who believe that human illness—and perhaps even all human behavior—has an exclusively neurochemical basis?

Speaking from personal experience, I grow a little more skeptical of my modern lenses with each passing year. I have met many people with physical illnesses, as well as many with mental illness, and rarely do I think that there is anything more to their situations than neurochemistry. But there are a few vivid exceptions. Persons whose lives are so destructive to themselves and others, and whose responses to Jesus are so hostile, that I wonder whether evil spirits are involved.

Perhaps you've had similar experiences. But even if you haven't, what do you make of the steady stream of atrocities scrolling across the headlines every day? Where does all this evil come from? Terrorism, serial killers, school shootings—can we attribute all of these to mental illness, full stop? Or is it possible that we're not seeing as clearly as we'd like to admit? As we turn now to the story in Mark 9, I hope you'll consider that what was wrong with this boy was really demonic possession.

THE UNBELIEVING GENERATION

After the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13), Jesus, Peter, James and John caught up with the other nine at the bottom of the mountain. A crowd had gathered, the disciples were arguing with the scribes, and Jesus asked what was going on. The father of the demon-possessed boy spoke up in 9:17:

“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.”

In these two verses, we hear not only of the original problem, namely the malady affecting this poor boy, but also of how it was then compounded by the disciples. The father said in 9:17, “I brought my son to *you*” (Jesus) but then goes on to say that Jesus' disciples weren't able to cast out the spirit. To make matters worse, the scribes were there. They saw the whole thing. When the disciples couldn't heal the boy, it appears that they provoked the disciples into an argument, perhaps about exorcism. I can imagine the disciples trying to save face, the scribes trying to rub their faces in it, and the poor father losing his patience with all of them.

So what was the problem here? There's no question that the disciples should have been able to cure this boy, because back in Mark 3:14-15 it says that:

[Jesus] appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

And then in Mark 6 he sent them out two-by-two as his ambassadors to do exactly that, and they had success wherever they went. So they should have been able to do it, but they couldn't. Why? Because of relationship failure.

There are many clues within the story that they failed from lack of relationship rather than a lack of knowledge. Here are two:

First, consider Jesus' first response to the disciples in 9:19.

And he answered them [i.e. the disciples], 'O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?'

It's a poignant question in light of what Jesus kept telling them about why they're on the road to Jerusalem. How long would he be with them? Not too much longer, because of what he was going to do. He would die on the cross as a sacrifice for the *faithlessness* of the world. Notice that Jesus didn't complain about the demon at all in this passage. It was of no consequence to him. It's *faithlessness* that was the underlying problem here (as well as in every episode in the Gospels).

Let's be clear that faithlessness is a failure of *relationship* rather than knowledge. To “believe in Jesus” is not merely to give intellectual assent to his existence and his sacrificial death. James writes that even the demons “believe.” It's not primarily a matter of the intellect, but of the

heart. A *faithful* generation, by contrast, are those people who not only acknowledge Jesus' existence, but also give him their allegiance and affection. And as we'll see, that's what the disciples were failing to do.

Second, consider Jesus second response to the disciples, inside the house at the end of the story in 9:29:

"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Learning on the road with Jesus isn't like college. Because the goal of discipleship isn't graduation *from* the academy, but actually becoming more deeply integrated and connected *to* it. In other words, as we grow in Christ, our objective is not to someday become independent from him, but rather to become increasingly dependent on him. It appears that after their initial success as Jesus' ambassadors, the disciples had gotten cocky. The disciples felt as if they had graduated from Jesus' school of wizardry, so they were *done* with prayer. What a mistake!

As modern westerners our tendency is to interpret the disciples' problem as a failure of technique: if the disciples had studied and practiced more, they wouldn't have forgotten this important step. But from Mark's perspective, their failure to pray was just another way of describing their faithlessness, because prayer is simply faith in action, the articulation of the heart. There's no such thing as faith without prayer; it's absurd to think of having one without the other.

Think about it. When a Christian stops praying, what is he or she saying? It sends a clear message, doesn't it? "I'm ok on my own. I can take care of things by myself." That's idolatry. We saw it last week, when Peter said to Jesus, "No, you don't understand what it means to be Messiah. Follow me and I'll show you." But then Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan. You're falling into the same old trap as at the very beginning, when Eve followed Satan, and Adam followed Eve, and he told God to get in line behind him." It's idolatry, plain and simple. Henry Nouwen calls it demonic: "Our demons say: 'We are too busy to pray, we have too many needs to attend to, too many people to respond to, too many wounds to heal.' Prayer is a luxury, something to do during a free hour, a day away from work or on a retreat." But whenever we do pray, we say that it is God, and God alone who is powerful. If we're going to do anything good in this world, it's going to happen by remaining connected to him.

Think of an electric tea kettle. As long as it remains plugged in, it's a wonderful appliance. But it's no more than a water pitcher without electricity. It's the same for us as disciples. Our success depends upon our remaining connected to God.

THE BELIEVING ONE

So Jesus came down the mountain and he found his disciples committing idolatry, with a faithless, prayer-less self-sufficiency reminiscent of the golden calf. But he also he found the father of the boy, who loved his son so much that he risked humiliation and rejection and failure and asked for

Jesus' help. Even after the failure of the disciples, the father was still persistent and he asked Jesus yet again in 22:

If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.

Jesus' response is another important clue to what this story is all about. He says in 23:

All things are possible for "the believing one."

Who do you think is "the believing one?" Jesus' leaves this ambiguous because I think he would have everyone who is standing there listening (and all of us who are reading) try his promise on for size. Think about it: what if you or I were "the believing one?" What if we were plugged in to the power source? How would that change things? Well, we can catch a glimpse of how life would change by considering several clear examples embedded in the story:

1. Without question, **Jesus** is "the believing one" par excellence. He remains plugged in, all the time. In other words, he fully believes in God the Father, and his relationship to God as his Son. Further, he is constantly in communion with his Father in prayer. And so what difference does that make? Look at what he does in 9:25:

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."

Listen to that wonderful authority. Think of the hope it must have given the father. It wasn't the promise of anti-convulsion meds (i.e. of merely managing the disease). It was the promise of a full, complete, and permanent cure! This was exactly what the father wanted.

But things got worse before they got better. Not only did that "mute" and "deaf" demon *hear* Jesus, but it also *cried out*, and then it afflicted the boy with one final, murderous convulsion, leaving him dead. So, v 27:

Jesus took him by the hand and resurrected him, and he arose.

This is the second instance in Mark of Jesus raising a child from the dead. (Remember the first? Jairus' daughter in Mark 5:21-43.) So how was Jesus able to do it? Was it because of his superior knowledge of wizard spells? Was it because he had super powers? No! He did it, as Mark has been saying over and over again, because Jesus remained plugged in to God the Father.

2. Besides Jesus, who else is "the believing one" in this story? How about **the boy's father**? When Jesus said to him, "all things are possible for the believing one," the man instantly responded saying (9:24):

I believe; help my unbelief!

And that's all it took. He plugged in to the Lord, expressing his faith in prayer, and God responded. James Edwards says this in his wonderful book on Mark's Gospel:

True faith is always aware how small and inadequate it is. The father becomes a believer not when he amasses a sufficient quantum of faith, but when he risks everything on what little faith he has, when he yields his insufficiency to the true sufficiency of Jesus... True faith takes no confidence in itself... True faith is unconditional openness to God, a decision in the face of all to the contrary that *Jesus is able*.

Faith isn't a bank account. You don't accumulate faith dollars, and then blow them on prayers. Faith is a relationship. And through his nascent relationship with Jesus, the boy's father also became "The believing one."

3. How about the **disciples**? Were they the "believing ones" in this story? Sadly, no. They failed because they weren't plugged in. They were like the tea kettle without the cord, frustratingly useless because of their disconnection from the power source. And what's even more frustrating is that even after this lesson, they still didn't get it. In 9:31, Jesus gave a second explicit prediction of what would happen to him in Jerusalem:

"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." 32 But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

After being told moments before, in v 29, that they failed for lack of prayer, how could they be afraid to ask Jesus for an explanation here? Sadly, their failure will get worse the closer they get to Jerusalem. Only after the resurrection will they look back and understand that Jesus was calling them to remain connected to him.

ASK THE KING

Finally, who else could be "the believing one?" We've considered Jesus, and the boy's father, and the disciples. What about the rest of us out in the crowd? Will we become believing ones? Will we plug in to the Lord?

The disciples' problem in this story is common to us all. If we're honest, we're all in over our heads. Each of us faces situations every day that are more than we can handle. And just like the disciples, we all want so badly to grow up and become self-sufficient. Sadly, because of our blurry lenses, we still believe that power comes from knowledge rather than relationship. In fact, some of us have even been fooled into thinking that God doesn't want to hear from us, perhaps because we're too needy, or too dirty, or too broken, when in fact God loves to hear our prayers, and all things are possible for "the believing ones." But all things are possible only if you're plugged in.

All of us who are parents want for our kids to grow up and live long, happy and fruitful lives. The way they'll do this is not by graduating from Jesus when they become adults, but by remaining plugged in. We want our kids to grow up and become independent—*independent of us*, that is. We

don't want them to become independent of the Lord. In fact, the more dependent they are on the Lord, the less parents have to worry about. It's the kids who become completely independent from God who keep parents up all night.

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus said it to his disciples this way:

As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:4-5.

You won't work if you're not plugged in. So plug in, and then ask the king.