

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL REMINDER

(Mark 9:14-32)

11.14.21

INTRODUCTION

There are two times — at least that I'm aware of — where my wife Linda flat out did not believe that something I told her was going to happen. The first was concerning our wedding. She didn't believe that I'd really be up front waiting for her to come down the aisle. So, when I was there when her dad brought her up, the first thing I said was, "Told you I'd be here." After 40 years, I'm still there.

The second was when we started planning a family vacation to Norway. Now I'd been there by myself, but I wanted to bring my family there as well, to hopefully have the same wonderful experience that I'd had. So, when we decided to actually do that, the girls and I figured out on our monthly refrigerator calendar how many days until we'd be leaving. Linda didn't want any part of it; as she told me, "I'll believe it when I see it." But sure enough, "zero day" came and we boarded a KLM 747 on our way to Amsterdam and, eventually, Stavanger, Norway.

Every once in a while, we all have those times where something may seem just a bit too unreal, for some reason just too big a stretch, to actually be real or believable. Today we're going to be talking about a moment in Christ's ministry where the disciples were confronted with a circumstance that tested what they were going to believe. It was going to be a critical lesson for them to grasp considering the events that were so shortly to be taking place. And in this moment is an equally important lesson for us to grasp in our faith as well. So, as we begin, **let's start with a moment in prayer!**

TEXT (Mark 9:14-32)

The bulk of the story today is going to be presented from the gospel of Mark. But similar to a number of our recent stories, where the material was found in three of the gospels, we will be borrowing from Matthew and Luke as well. And, in the context of the moment, this is occurring right on the heels of last week's story of Christ's transfiguration, witnessed, as you recall, by Peter, James, and John. We'll actually let Luke kick this story off:

The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met Him — Luke 9:37.

You know how sometimes, you come home from a getaway week or weekend somewhere and, just as you arrive home, there's a stack of envelopes (probably bills) waiting for you in the mailbox and then, just as you hit the front door, your phone starts ringing. Well, the getaway was fun while it lasted. That might be what it felt like for Christ and the disciples returning from their amazing and literal "mountaintop experience" from last week's story. The real world was still there; in fact, it was waiting for them and "loaded for bear" when they came.

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. "What are you arguing with them about?" He asked — Mark 9:14-16.

Some sort of “bru-ha-ha” was already happening as they arrived. The other nine disciples were there, of course, a crowd was gathered around them, and some of the religious leaders — “teachers of the law” — were also there, and apparently raising some sort of dispute with the disciples. So, when Jesus arrived, the crowd, being in awe of seeing Him there, literally rushed as one to Jesus to greet Him. In the meantime, Jesus was wanting to know, as would any of us, “So what’s going on? What exactly is your dispute with my guys?” The answer came in the form of a father seeking help for his son.

[A] man approached Jesus and knelt before Him. “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said — Matthew 17:14b-15a.

What a sweet picture both of urgency and humility. His kneeling before Jesus reflected the body language of an inferior approaching a superior. And then, before any specific details are shared, the father simply petitioned Jesus for mercy — asking for the compassion that comes from divine grace. And he was asking with such urgency that Luke tells us that he was literally begging Jesus to look at his son, his only child.

And why? Each of Matthew, Mark, and Luke provide very ample reason through their accounts of why this father was so intent on seeing Jesus:

“He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. . . . [M]y son . . . is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. . . . it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. . . . [H]e suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him — a father, Matthew 17:15b; Mark 9:17-18a; Luke 9:39.

One of contemporary culture’s favorite criticisms of the Bible is in the medical area, and this is a good example of that criticism. Behaviors such as those associated with epilepsy, for instance, were often credited, due to the lack of medical knowledge at that time, to “evil spirits,” as this father reports. But there was also a real concern for his son being driven to suicide, as he was reported to be falling into fire or water. Bottom line: All of this appeared to be on the verge of destroying this young man.

And as if all of this wasn’t distress enough for this father, he got no help from the disciples, as all three gospels’ writers (including Matthew, who would have been there in person) report. And you can hear the father’s increasing desperation in their words: ***I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not heal him. . . . I asked Your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not. . . . I begged Your disciples to drive it out, but they could not*** — a father, ***Matthew 17:16; Mark 9:18b; Luke 9:40.***

“I brought him to them, I asked them to drive out this spirit, I begged them to drive out this spirit.” But then the tragic conclusion, from all three gospels: “They could not.” Ouch! But now at least things were beginning to look up. Jesus was there, but first He was just the least bit upset.

Conveniently enough, though the religious leaders has historically performed exorcisms themselves, they were content to just let the disciples twist in the wind in their failure in this moment — reflecting no love at all: not for the father or his son, or for the disciples. So, Jesus had plenty of blame to go around.

“You unbelieving [literally, “faithless, without faith”] [and perverse — “morally corrupt”] generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to Me” — Mark 9:19 [Matthew 17:17a; Luke 9:41a].

Before going after the demon, Jesus goes after His disciples and, in fact, the entire crowd, for their continuing lack of belief in what is possible for them to accomplish by means of faith in Him. This frustration was born out of the depths of His love for them, and their seeming inability to grasp the incredible, life-altering, eternal gift that was standing right in front of them: “Guys, everything you needed to meet this man’s request for his son was completely available to you.” But, as frustrated and saddened as He is, He hasn’t forgotten about this man’s son.

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 — Mark 9:20.

This makes total sense. The demon recognized into whose presence he had now been brought, and he knew that the end of his time torturing this young man was coming to an end. His only option was to cause as much chaos and mayhem to this guy as possible.

Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. “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” — Mark 9:21-22.

This had obviously been a terribly long ordeal; the root for the Greek word suggests that this had been ongoing since infancy.

But first, this was a test of this father’s faith, which became an amazing teaching moment for the disciples and the crowd as well. The father may have become disillusioned by the inability of the disciples of Jesus to come to his son’s aid. So, he concluded, if the disciples could not help, maybe their master, their rabbi, was no different. After all, this was probably his first personal encounter with Christ, so everything he knew about Him previous to this was just hearsay. Some pretty amazing stories had made the rounds about this Nazarene. Healing? Raising from the dead? Dad simply wasn’t so sure anymore, and he said so: “IF you can” — which was way yonder more significant from Christ’s point of view than anything else the father has said. And Jesus jumped on it.

“If You can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes” — Mark 9:23.

This cut to the heart of everything. As long as the disciples or the crowd or anybody else saw Jesus, for all His great teaching, preaching, healing and other amazing capabilities, as still being limited, as being “the firm possibility of a definite maybe,” faith in Him was essentially going to be meaningless. Jesus came to bring meaning into people’s lives, including the meaning that, in Him and through Him, all things were possible. It was faith in Jesus Christ that would bring life to all of God’s promises. Jesus’ response was wonderful, and expressed so basic and so simple at the same time: “All things are wholly possible to anybody who believes in Me. Do you really think I would have come down from My Father’s heaven to represent anything less?”

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” — Mark 9:24.

What a wonderful response by the father. He is basically saying what Jesus would say later to the disciples at the Last Supper: “[A]part from Me you can do nothing” — *Jesus Christ, John*

15:5b. In other words, “I want to believe, but I cannot believe on my own. Please enable me to believe. Please become my ability to believe.”

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.” 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 — Mark 9:25-27.

We know from this moment that an evil spirit was to blame for this young man’s situation, for two reasons: (1) the Bible says so, and (2) Jesus specifically and directly addressed and identified the spirit as the very real being and entity it was. We know from past healings that Jesus showed His power over disease, but the Bible identifies disease in those cases as disease. This was not disease, nor was it the ignorance of medical dark ages. This was spiritual warfare with a genuine, authentic evil spirit — and Jesus won.

And then, as Matthew tells us, this father’s son ***was healed at that moment — Matthew 17:18b.*** And, as Luke adds, ***[Jesus] gave him back to his father — Luke 9:42b.*** And the reaction of the crowd? Luke tells us that, too: ***[T]hey were all amazed [“struck with astonishment”] [marveling — “in wonder and admiration”] at the greatness [“the power and majesty”] of God — Luke 9:43.*** What an incredible testimony this gave to who this Radical Rabbi truly was!

Now while the crowd was besides themselves with what they had seen, the disciples were struggling with what they had seen — their failure to heal this young man from his demonic possession: ***After Jesus had gone indoors, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” — Mark 9:28.***

Why had they failed? Jesus had certainly given them that power when He had sent them out to minister; in fact, Matthew recorded His specific words: ***“As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:7-8.*** Clearly, they had been granted that power. So, what had gone so embarrassingly wrong here? Well, to help us understand the answer to that question, it turns out that Mark and Matthew both give us insight into a particular piece of the puzzle that, together, contributed to this failure.

1) From Mark: ***“This kind can come out only by prayer” — Jesus Christ, Mark 9:29.***

Now there was a belief prominent in Jewish circles that this kind of evil spirit was most difficult to deal with due to the fact that it was a mute spirit. It was believed that, for any exorcism to be successful, one had to be able to know the spirit’s name. Knowing the name was crucial to claiming power over the spirit. If a spirit kept its victim mute, you might not ever know the name; therefore, power over the spirit might not ever be attained. Of course, that would not be an issue for Jesus, and it shouldn’t have been an issue for His disciples. But prayer was — but not prayer for its own sake. Prayer draws us closer to the heart of God, which means prayer puts us more in line with God’s power. God’s power is completely connected to God’s heart. They needed to approach God from a standpoint of complete and desperate dependence on Him to be able to accomplish anything — including defeating this spirit.

2) From Matthew: ***“Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 17:20.*** The key to faith as small as a mustard seed? Despite its tiny size, the mustard seed held life, and the disciples would similarly need to have a living faith — not a mechanical faith — to succeed. Again, that living faith revolved around prayer — being connected to God’s heart. Faith is impossible outside of God’s heart.

So, what had happened? To put it simply, they had once been empowered by the command of Christ, but they had lost sight of who it was that empowered them. In short, they lost their connection. They attempted to get ahead in their own strength and, as they came to the end of their own strength, they came to the end of their own faith. They only became desperate at the end of their own strength; they were not desperate as a way of life.

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because He was teaching His disciples. He said to them, [“Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you.”] “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill Him, and after three days He will rise [He will be raised to life].” But they did not understand what He meant and were afraid to ask Him about it — [Luke 9:44a] Mark 9:30-32. And the disciples were filled with grief — Matthew 17:23b.

This is why all the lessons about faith were going to be so critically important. There were events on their way that, in this moment, they were not able to understand. But when they occurred, as well as in the dark days following, their faith could no longer be up for grabs. They would need to know what they believed — and then act on it.

APPLICATION

So, why had the disciples failed in this moment? They had become disconnected to their power source — Jesus Christ. Not because He had been gone from them, but because they had let themselves get gone from Him. Once upon a time they had been graciously granted some amazing powers, but it appears that they just assumed on those powers as some sort of right that they had been granted and that they could go back to whenever it was needed. What they failed to understand is the same thing that we so often fail to understand — there is no “cruise control” in the Christian faith; there is no “running on fumes.” There is only maintaining our connection to God through Jesus Christ as a child desires remaining connected to their parents. There is only desiring a life of holy desperation. It begs the questions: How desperate are we to grow in our connections to God through Jesus Christ? How desperate are we to hit our knees over everything in prayer? How desperate are we to explore more deeply the wonders of God’s word? How desperate are we to see our faith growing and developing? How desperate are we to be living pleasing to God as our one and only priority?

We can never forget that, in terms of our lives in Christ, we will NEVER grow up. We will never be so strong or mature that we can just get along on what we have learned in our past and let that be enough. We need to be constantly seeking, constantly feeding, constantly growing. We need to remain in helplessness, aware that there is NEVER anything we can do apart from him.

And how do we develop that helpless desperation for God? Well, we see a version of it in the relationships we developed with our spouses, or with our best friends. Once upon a time, we were strangers, so much so that, at one point in time, we did not even know that person existed. So, what made the difference? Making time — doing everything we could to spend time with that person.

The same is true with God, and the goal is this: The more time we spend with Him, the more our lives become less and less about us, and more about Him. Our resentments, our prejudices, our grudges, our angers — all these things now find a way to be surrendered, to be given up, and all because we realize that life has become totally about pleasing Him. And anything that doesn't please Him, we desire to be rid of, just as He desires it. So, when Paul writes: ***I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ*** — ***Paul, Philippians 3:8***, that is including everything about us, including all our attitudes, that our lives may be in alignment with Him. In fact, we gladly give them up! This is a love story, folks! We desire our lives to be what God through Christ desires our lives to be because we love Him. And the more time spent with Him, the more the Holy Spirit grows that love in our lives.

CONCLUSION

And we maintain our connection because of the priorities for ministry Christ may have for us. For the disciples, it was teaching them what their faith needed to be based upon as they faced the unspeakable agonies they would witness in the sufferings of Christ. For us, it is learning what our faith needs to be based on as we face these last days, our culture collapsing into a humanistic mess of hostility to Jesus in the face of support of anything and everything else not Jesus. We have been placed here and now in God's perfect sovereignty to be His ambassadors, His representatives, to a world that seems so completely unconcerned about His place in their lives.

But despite seeing that all around us, the one-and-only question that Jesus will have for every human soul remains the same: "What have you done with my Son?" For Christians, that question will be about what we did to encourage and spread the gospel. For the world, that question will be about how they responded to His sacrifice on the cross for their sins.

Folks, everything we do is only as strong as the passion we seek for the gospel — our desperation to reflect the Son, our desperation to speak for the Son, our desperation to yield wholeheartedly to the gospel's call to be continually changing us into the presence of Jesus Christ. Is that the greatest, most desperate desire of your life? Let's pray!