

The Power of Faith-Filled Prayers

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 9:14-29/ February 4, 2024

Introduction:

How do you respond to moments of failure and experience with weakness in your walk with Christ? If you are like me, you may experience moments like these far more often than you would like. Most of us find our failures in the Christian life to be deeply discouraging and even embarrassing. We often try to hide our weaknesses and pretend we have no struggles at all. Then we convince ourselves we can overcome our weaknesses and minimize our failures by trying harder. I am not saying we are not called to strive to obey and follow Christ, as Paul tells us in Philippians 2:12 to work out our salvation, but what if our moments of failure and experiences with weakness are meant to cause a different kind of response? The deeper I have gone in my walk with Christ, the more I have come to believe that our experience with failure and weakness are not designed primarily to call us to work harder, but to remind us of where to constantly turn for the power and strength to follow Christ. Our passage, in Mark 9:14-29, shows us how failure and weakness shouldn't discourage or embarrass us, or cause us to pretend we don't struggle, but point to our need of Christ and should drive us to our knees in faith-filled prayer. I see three things from this story that lead us to this truth. Starting in verses 14-19, where we see,

The Root of Powerless Ministry

This story holds an interaction between Jesus and a demon that should feel familiar to us, as another demon stands no chance in the presence of Jesus. However, unlike Jesus' earlier interactions with demons, this uniquely detailed story focuses our attention more on the hearts of those around Jesus than His power over the demonic realm. Look at verses 14-16, "And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?'" Following the transfiguration and their descent down the mountain, Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John come to a hostile environment. Crowds are gathered around the disciples, watching the scribes argue with them about something. Note how Mark inserts a comment between his focus on this argument. In verse 14 we're told about the argument and in verse 16 Jesus asks what it is about, and in between, Mark makes tells us about the crowds amazement at the sight of Jesus, emphasized by his common use of the word "immediately." The term for "Greatly amazed" carries this idea of being overwhelmed with wonder or trembling in astonishment. Some assume Jesus may have residual effects from the transfiguration, but I don't see any evidence of that in the text. I think Mark is drawing attention to the crowd's growing response to the presence of Jesus, especially the power of His ministry over the forces of evil. Think of how often the crowds have been astonished at the authority in Jesus' teaching and healing power up to this point. Yet, this time, their astonishment comes prior to His divine activity. The scene is set, we are drawn into this argument taking place between the scribes and the disciples with crowds watching closely until Jesus arrives. When they see Him, the attention shifts to Jesus, and He asks the scribes "What are you arguing about?" Notice who responds in verses 17-18, "And someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 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.'" It isn't the scribes who answer Jesus' question, but a father desperate to find help for his son. The father recounts the son's problems in vivid language, describing what sounds a lot like epilepsy. This has causing some to dismiss this event as natural causes, denying the reality of demonic activity, and others to wrongfully equate all episodes of epilepsy and seizures with demonic activity. We need to maintain a proper balance between in our understanding. The father clearly links the son's troubles with demonic activity saying, "he has a spirit that makes him mute, and whenever it seizes him, it throws him down." The attacks of this spirit are recounted by Mark three more times in verses 20, 22, and 26.

Yet, just because this activity mimics what we see in epilepsy, doesn't mean all episodes of epilepsy are demonic activity. We should recognize demons are actively at work in the world, and their influence can even mimic natural ailments, but also be careful not to attribute everything to them. The end of verse 18 sets our attention on the main point. This father shares that he came to Jesus for help and asked the disciples to cast it out when He wasn't there, but the disciples "were not able." Though they had been given authority over unclean spirits in chapter 6, they were powerless in this situation. What changed? Look at verse 19, where Mark begins to answer that question, "And he [Jesus] 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.'" Who is Jesus speaking to? Some believe it's the scribes and crowds, because the word used for generation throughout Mark never refers to the disciples. Others believe it's the disciples because the "them" in verse 16 is the disciples. I am persuaded Jesus is speaking to everyone present with an emphasis on the disciples' lack of faith. The scribes were likely arguing with the disciples because of their disbelief in the power of Jesus to do the things He was doing. You can almost hear them mocking the disciples, "see, this Jesus is a fraud because you couldn't cast out this demon." Yet, Jesus' cries of how long he will be with them and bear with them are reminiscent of many of His responses to the disciples' failure. And we will see how their inability to heal this boy has certainly shaken the father's faith as well. Jesus' lament echoes the Lord's against unbelieving Israel in Numbers 14:11, where God says to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?" Jesus is likely lamenting the lack of faith in everyone present, pointing to that lack of faith as the root of the disciples' powerless ministry. Church, this doesn't mean our faith is always the reason for a lack of healing or deliverance, but it does show us it could be. So, we should reflect on this moment and ask ourselves if a lack of true and full faith is the reason for our powerless ministry. This leads to the second thing, in verses 19-27,

The Power of a Humble Cry for Faith

The tension is heightened in the narrative at the end of verse 19 as Jesus commands for the boy to be brought to him. Look at what happens next in verse 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." As soon as the boy is brought to Jesus, his past suffering becomes present suffering. Note how Mark shows this a response of this spirit to the presence of Jesus, saying "when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy." The presence of Jesus caused this spirit to show its true nature. Church, see the destructive nature of the demonic realm. We are told from the Bible that Satan deceives us by presenting himself as an angel of light. Many of the works of darkness are clothed in deception, causing us to consider them harmless. When we see them depicted like this in the scriptures, we should recognize all of Satan's activity as just as destructive. Notice how Jesus interacts, not with the demon at first, but the father in verses 21-22, "And Jesus asked his father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. 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.'" In compassion, Jesus asks the father how long this has been happening. Then, the father's heart for his son is revealed, as he not only shares how long but further expresses the devastation caused by this spirit from childhood, "casting him into fire and into water, to destroy him." What follows should prick the depths of our heart. Feel the weight of the father's final words, "if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Church, do you see what the disciple's failure produced? It produced doubt in the father's heart not only of the power of Jesus but His compassion as well. Sadly, at times, our lack of faith leads to others to stumble in their trust of Jesus Christ. Yet, praise God that Jesus' power and compassion are constantly extended to our weak hearts. Look at verses 23-24, "And Jesus said to him, 'If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'" Two things in this exchange have sunk deep into my heart as I have reflected on this passage. First, is the words of Jesus in verse 23, "All things are possible for the one who believes."

Last week, we heard God tell us to listen to Jesus, and now we hear Jesus telling this father, and us, “All things are possible for the one who believes.” I know your temptation right now to couch this statement, thinking something like, “Well, I know all things are possible, but it doesn’t mean that is what God wills to do.” I know that temptation well because it is often mine. But I want to encourage you to push that thought out of your mind right now and let only the words of Christ remain, “All things are possible for the one who believes.” Then, focus on the father’s cry in verse 24, “immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” Church, this is a pure cry of faith. The father simultaneously expresses some belief while acknowledging a deep dependency on Christ. He acknowledges he is part of this faithless generation, but he also sees Christ can change that. This is the reality of our faith. As James Edwards says well, “The sole bridge between frail humanity and the all-sufficiency of God is faith... The statement that “everything is possible to him who believes” must appear to the father as an elusive hope, for the faith he needs to heal his son is a faith he does not have—or so he thinks. True faith is always aware how small and inadequate it is” (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 280). And church, we see that this kind of faith is all that is needed. Look at verses 25-27, “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.’ 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.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.” The crowd starts to gather together, so Jesus quickly casts out the demon. Note how this is a response to the father’s humble cry for faith, and Jesus not only casts the demon out but commands it never to enter the boy again. Then, in a futile display of limited power, the demon convulses the boy again in one final attempt to destroy him, an attempt that appears to be successful as Mark describes the boy looking like a corpse and people claiming he is dead. But pay attention to the important contrast in verse 27, “But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.” It is impossible not to see the focus on death and resurrection here, likely foreshadowing Jesus’ final victory of the forces of darkness on the cross. This, like many stories in the gospels, point us to Christ’s true and lasting victory over Satan’s power that would come through His death and resurrection. As the crowds thought the boy was defeated, they will assume Jesus was as well. Yet, the full story of the gospel of Jesus Christ shows that He truly experienced the death we deserved, but He did not remain in the grave. And through His death and resurrection, He secured redemption and resurrection life and power for all who believe. As we see this deliverance coming in response to the father’s humble cry for faith, we are taught to cry out in a similar way for our own faith in the resurrection power of Jesus. Consider one more thing I see in this passage, in verses 28-29,

The Connection of Faith and Prayer

Following this account of the disciples’ failure and the humble faith of the father, Mark shares a private conversation between Jesus and the disciples to discover the reason for their failure. Look carefully at verse 28-29, “And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” You can understand their question, right? Wait, Jesus, you sent us out with authority over the unclean spirits, and we exercised that authority once before. Why could we not do it this time? Notice the nuance in their question and Jesus’ response. They ask, “Why could we not cast it out?” Their question is focused on their strength and abilities, suggesting they assumed they were now sufficient within themselves for this task. Then, notice Jesus’ answer, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” Some translations add, “and fasting,” but that is not found in the earliest manuscripts, and many believe it was inserted because of early church traditions. Prayer is the focus for Mark. Now, there is an important question here. Is Jesus saying some kinds of demons need prayer to cast them out and others don’t? I don’t think so. We see nothing in this passage or any other others to suggest there are special categories demons requiring certain things to cast them out. Also, in Matthew 17:20, Matthew records the same scene but shares Jesus saying it is, “Because of [their] little faith,” with no mention of prayer at all.

Jesus certainly wouldn't suggest faith is only required for certain kinds of demons. What I believe Jesus is saying is, "prayer is always required when interacting with spiritual forces because prayer reveals a dependence on God's power." When we link this back to Jesus' lament in verse 19, we can see that their confidence had shifted from faith in Jesus' power to pride in their own. If you try to battle spiritual forces in your own strength, without faith in God's power, and prayers of dependence on him, you will always fail. Faith is exercised through prayer. As James Edwards comments, "The present passage introduces prayer in the context of faith, connecting it with spiritual power.... Prayer is the focusing and directing of faith in specific requests to God. Both faith and prayer testify that spiritual power is not in oneself but in God alone, and both wait in trust upon his promise to save" (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 281). Mark is showing how prayer and faith are deeply connected and always necessary. Church, we need to stay dependent on the power of Christ through faith-filled prayer. Even if that prayer of faith is simply a humble cry for more faith, it is connected to the power of the one who promises that "All things are possible for the one who believes." The one whose glory was revealed on the mount of transfiguration. The one who died and rose again. The one who has received dominion, glory, and a kingdom. So, to conclude I want to suggest two take aways from this passage. First,

1) Strive to Trust in the Power and Goodness of Christ

Think on movements of the father's faith in this passage. He sought Jesus to deliver his son, but his faith was weakened by the disciple's failure. Yet, when Jesus responded to that lack of faith, and called on him to believe, he lunged towards Jesus in a desperate cry for the faith he needed to trust in the power and goodness of Christ. Hebrews 11:6 tells us, "Without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." We need to have faith, but our passage teaches us that faith can be as simple as a cry for His help to believe. The faith God desires from us is a faith that strives to trust in His power and goodness. The second take away is to,

2) Remain Dependent on Christ through Prayer

Mark's focus on prayer shows us faith isn't a simple belief that everything will be okay. Nor believing that you have power in yourself to accomplish whatever you want to. True faith understands that the power belongs to God alone and remembers that we connect with that power through prayer. One of the most quoted scriptures might be Philippians 4:13, that says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." We often see this quoted with a suggestion that Christ has given someone the strength and talents to accomplish anything they set their mind to do. But the context of that passage, and original language, show that Paul is speaking about a constant and regular strengthening by Christ to thrive in any kind of circumstance. And it is no coincidence that he shares this after giving a strong call for persevering prayer. Paul is saying, as I remain dependent on Christ through prayer, relying on His strength and not my own, He strengthens me with faith to face anything, supplying exactly what I need.

Conclusion:

Church, I opened our time together asking where you turn in your weakness and failures, and I pray our passage has pushed your heart depend on Christ through consistent faith-filled prayer. . As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, set your hearts and minds on the one who strengthens us. If you haven't trusted in the saving work of Christ, look at His power and goodness on display in this passage. Look to the cross and trust that His death is sufficient for you and cry out to him like the father did. If you know Christ, strive to trust in His power and goodness. Cry out for help with your unbelief if needed. Humble yourself before Him and express a dependence on Him through prayer. During this time you are welcome to the front come and kneel before Him in humility, remain seated to reflect, or stand and sing to rejoice in His goodness. If you know your faith is weak, we have a team of people ready to pray with you and for you who will be worshipping on the front rows or bottom of the back stairs with lanyards on. Let's approach His throne of grace with confidence today, knowing He will help us in our time of need. Would you pray with me?