

When You Wonder If Your Prayers Matter

Series: How God Changes Our Attitudes

Do you struggle with prayer?

What Does The Bible Say?

16 “What is all this arguing about?” Jesus asked. 17 One of the men in the crowd spoke up and said, “Teacher, I brought my son so you could heal him. He is possessed by an evil spirit that won’t let him talk. 18 And whenever this spirit seizes him, it throws him violently to the ground. Then he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn’t do it.” 19 Jesus said to them, “You faithless people! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” (Mark 9:16–19 NLT)

Why was Jesus upset?

14 Then he appointed twelve of them and called them his apostles. They were to accompany him, and he would send them out to preach, 15 giving them authority to cast out demons.

(Mark 3:14–15 NLT)

The nine disciples had failed. They had lost touch with their power source.

21 “How long has this been happening?” Jesus asked the boy’s father. He replied, “Since he was a little boy. 22 The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can.” 23 “What do you mean, ‘If I can’?” Jesus asked. “Anything is possible if a person believes.” 24 The father instantly cried out, “I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:21–24 NLT)

Why is faith important? Because God does not jump through hoops.

How Can You Obey?

28 Afterward, when Jesus was alone in the house with his disciples, they asked him, “Why couldn’t we cast out that evil spirit?” 29 Jesus replied, “This kind can be cast out only by prayer. (Mark 9:28–29 NLT)

The power of prayer is in the one who hears it and not the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference.

Additional Notes:

If you would like to use your home to disciple others, check out our training at www.crosswaveschurch.com/host. Cross Waves has produced short videos to train you how to use your home to reach others for Christ. So please check it out.

Explore:

Today's Tough Questions segment comes from the book, Schreiner, T. R. (2010). 40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law. (B. L. Merkle, Ed.) (p. 26). Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional.

Explore:

What a pathetic picture we get from the Gospels together! The demon seizes the boy (9:18)—the child screams (Luke 9:39)—the spirit throws him to the ground, and he foams at the mouth. He grinds his teeth and becomes stiff as a board (9:18). Many times he has been cast into a fire or water by the spirit (Matthew 17:15), so that he is covered with burn scars. But even worse, the spirit has made him deaf and dumb (9:17, 25). He lived an aquarium-like existence. He could see what was going on around his pathetic body, but he could not hear or speak.

Hughes, R. K. (1989). *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior* (Vol. 2, p. 22). Westchester, IL: Crossway Books.

Explore:

The boy was both deaf and dumb (Mark 9:17, 25), and the demon was doing his best to destroy him. Imagine what it would be like for that father to try to care for the boy and protect him! Jesus had given His disciples authority to cast out demons (Mark 6:7, 13), and yet their ministry to the boy was ineffective. No wonder the Lord was grieved with them! How often He must be grieved with us when we fail to use the spiritual resources He has graciously given to His people!

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 141–142). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Explore:

Jesus hears the voice of the scribes in derision. A heated contest is raging between the nine disciples whom Jesus left on the plain and the scribes, probably another “truth squad” sent from Jerusalem. The scribes are not only winning the debate, but twisting the blade of ridicule with which they have stabbed the disciples. Jesus tries to come to the rescue of His disciples by asking the scribes, “What are you discussing with them?” (v. 16). Their silence is a smirk. No one answers until a man steps out of the crowd and tells Jesus about bringing his demon-possessed son to the disciples for healing, but finding that they lack the power to cast the evil spirit out.

McKenna, D. L., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1982). Mark (Vol. 25, p. 182). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc.

Explore:

After the serene image of the transfiguration, Jesus then returns to find the disciples who earlier had cast out many demons

(6:13) unable to exorcise a particularly destructive demon. Jesus attributes their inability to lack of faith (9:19, cf. 6:6) and the story becomes the occasion for instruction on faith. Jesus tells the father that “all things are possible to one who believes” (cf. 11:20–25), which evokes the prayer of the father, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” The exorcism (9:25–27) is then recounted in more detail than normal with an overlay of resurrection language (vv. 26–27, “he is dead ... he rose up”). Alone with the disciples Jesus tells them that such a demon can be driven out only by prayer. Whatever the original form of this vivid narrative, Mark has adapted it to his theology. The promise of glory and the coming exaltation of Jesus (the transfiguration) exist along with destructive power of evil. During Jesus’ absence (which Mark’s community experiences), prayer enables his followers to confront this power. The path from unbelief to belief begins with the cry, “help my unbelief.” The first passion

prediction unit thus concludes with a summons to faith and prayer.

Mays, J. L. (Ed.). (1988). Harper's Bible commentary (p. 995). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Explore:

Narratively, the attention now shifts to what went on with the larger group of disciples in Jesus' absence. This section of Mark contains no other "mighty work," and this account is unusually detailed, so we should examine carefully its two primary parts: vv. 14–19, the disciples' failure; and vv. 20–27, the father's faith.

Like Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai, Jesus also meets disbelief and disorder when he comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration. His other disciples, a crowd, and some scribes are arguing. The argument seems to be a result of the disciples' failure to heal. In a crisis, all they can do is talk;

this argumentative spirit demonstrates lack of faith. Jesus' appearance has changed, a change immediately recognizable (v. 15, herein is another parallel to Moses). Jesus seeks to discover the cause of the confusion (v. 16) in another text in which he takes initiative as a questioner.

Verses 19–27 occur only in Mark and deal primarily with faith in crisis (a special concern of Mark's original audience). Jesus' outburst against the disciples (v. 19) is because of their faithlessness. An argumentative spirit and disbelief stand in the way of a cure. As in earlier Markan accounts, the spirit world recognizes Jesus (1:24), who turns to engage the father (whom we now know as the speaker in vv. 17–18, which describes what appears to be epilepsy). The father's approach to Jesus is tentative ("if you are able to do anything"), and it is just this tentativeness that concerns Jesus, who throws the issue back on the father (v. 23). If he can believe, the power of God will be made operative.

In a burst of both insight and honesty, the father replies, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (v. 24). In response (before a crowd forms, a veiled reference to the messianic secret?), Jesus permanently exorcises the unclean spirit (“never enter him again”). It is worth noting, however, that v. 26 suggests things get worse before they improve, so much worse that people think the youth has died. Characteristically, Jesus takes him by the hand and raises him, symbolically bringing another child back from the dead (cf. 1:31; 5:41–42). Whether or not vv. 28–29 are a post-Markan addition, they focus again on the issue of faith. Characteristically, Jesus gives the disciples special instruction in the house, privately and away from the crowds (see 4:10, 34). The disciples, Jesus explains, were unable to cast out the demon because of their lack of prayer (and some manuscripts add “fasting”). Prayer to God is an expression of faith in God (here compared to an argumentative attitude). This faith is not cheap; it comes by disciplined behavior. The alternatives presented here

are futile contentiousness, which indicates lack of trust or faith that God will act, and trust in spite of moments of unbelief (v. 24). No explanation of why faithful prayer seems not to be answered, no program of “how to” is presented by Jesus, but only an indication of the importance of belief and faith (even in the face of what may seem a worsening situation).

The text is an especially potent one for a teaching sermon on the spiritual life. The “dumb spirit” (vv. 17–18) can be seen as a metaphor for all that would keep us from trust in God, all that would lead us to “grind our teeth” or “be rigid” instead of calling out to God, reaching for God. The three causes for the disciples’ failure to exorcise that spirit—their argumentativeness, their lack of faith, and their lack of discipline in prayer—are spiritual difficulties of our age as well. In a crisis, all the disciples can do is talk. The exorcism/healing as a whole suggests the “active” alternatives of trust and prayer. Within the larger context of Mark 8:22–10:52 the emphasis is clearly on the

faith that must characterize discipleship. As Ralph Martin notes in his preaching commentary on Mark, “in its original setting [the account] referred to Jesus, the man of faith who is claiming the confidence to see the boy healed on the ground that he trusts his heavenly Father to work through him. We get a fresh insight into Jesus’ own life of trust here, and it calls us to share his faith in the limitless energy of God to touch and heal human lives.”

Thurston, B. B. (2002). *Preaching Mark* (pp. 104–105).

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Question 1 of 5

What reasons do we give for not praying as we think we should?

Question 2 of 5

The man in Mark 9:24 prayed, “I do believe! but help me overcome my unbelief!” Is this a prayer of faith? Is it an admirable prayer? Do you ever pray like this? Explain.

Question 3 of 5

The power of prayer is in the one who hears it and not the one who says it. What does this imply for our prayer life?

Question 4 of 5

Do you want to improve your prayer life? What specific steps can you take to do so?

Question 5 of 5

In what way was the man’s comment, “If you can do anything” conditioned by his experience with Jesus’ disciples? How do our actions affect unbeliever’s opinions of Jesus?