

On March 3, 1978, Karl Wallenda stepped out onto a cable suspended 120' above the street stretching between two high-rise hotels in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The walk was routine for 73 yr. old who had been wire-walking for 57 years. No handstands, bicycles, 7 man pyramids...just Karl and his 23-ft. 36 lb. balancing pole. As he inched across the wire it began to “dance.” Wallenda crouched and cried out, “Tighten it.” Those were his last words as he lost his balance and fell to his death.

In Mark's gospel Jesus leads His disciples out on a high wire. The ability to keep your balance is an underrated characteristic of a disciple. All of life is a balancing act. We must balance things like diet and exercise; work and rest; income and output. Even following Jesus is a balancing act. We seek the things above while we live below. We acknowledge Jesus is the Sovereign Lord but we also acknowledge we are His responsible agents. Without Jesus we can do nothing but without us He will do nothing. When we lose our balance as followers of Jesus the results can be painful if not tragic.

Mark 9 presents a balancing act between worship and service. Would you prefer to live on the mountaintop and worship God like Peter, James and John or live in the valley and serve people with the nine other disciples? Be careful. If we lose our balance on the side of worship we fall into a form of mysticism that diminishes our love for our neighbor. If we fall off on the side of service we fall into the trap of humanism that diminishes our love for God. Worship and service are inseparable.

While three of Jesus' disciples were on the mountaintop witnessing His glory, nine others were down in the valley trying desperately to serve a man with a demon-possessed son. Let's take a look at Mark 9:14-29.

There is nothing worse than trying to serve God only to have it end in embarrassing failure. Last week Jana and I visited friends who were remodeling a part of their home. The husband recognized how much energy and effort his wife had put into this project and was suddenly overcome by a desire to serve her so he said, “Hey, do you want to go to Tuesday Morning and look at pillows?” (Now seriously men, how many of YOU have ever said that? So you know that this was a Holy Spirit-inspired moment!). She was delighted at his suggestion and they took off. After walking around Tuesday Morning for what seemed like an eternity to my friend (probably 10 minutes), something went terribly wrong. His wife asked, “Couldn't you just spend all day in this store?” At that moment it seemed the Holy Spirit left the building. Like Peter at the end of Mark 8, my friend was about to follow the smartest thing he had ever done in his marriage with the dumbest thing he had ever done – he said nothing. Unfortunately his face said it all. To which his wife replied, “Well, if you didn't want to come here you should have said so in the first place.” And the conversation went down hill from there.

The disciples' may have meant well but their attempt to serve was an embarrassing failure. This little boy isn't the only one who needs to be delivered. The disciples need to be delivered from themselves. They failed, primarily because they lost the tension between worship and service. In their effort to serve they left out an essential ingredient

in worship. They lost their balance and the result is obvious. The greatest hindrance to our service is the illusion of our own cleverness. Jesus said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” Therefore we are sabotaged by our own self-sufficiency.

There are four brief vignettes in vv. 14-50 showcasing various forms of self-sufficiency. In each vignette the disciples are preoccupied with their own status. They have yet to learn that they cannot serve in Jesus’ name without Jesus. They are victims of a very subtle but serious error in our relationship with Jesus – do your very best and, if necessary, Jesus will do the rest. Let’s take a look at four examples of self-sufficiency.

I. The disciples must be delivered from self-reliance. Why did they fail to cast out this demon? They were relying on their position as disciples and their proximity to Jesus and not on the power of God. The attitude Jesus is looking for is found in the father of the afflicted boy...v. 24. What a beautiful prayer of confession. Prayer is an admission of our desperate need for God’s intervention in our lives. But doesn’t the Bible say, “God helps those who help themselves.” No it doesn’t. The Bible paints a picture of a God who helps those who cannot help themselves, the undeserving, those who don’t measure up, those who fall short of His standard, those who acknowledge their helplessness. Do you know that old hymn by Philip Bliss, “Man of Sorrows, What a Name?” The third verse says, “Guilty, vile and helpless we; Spotless Lamb of God was He; Full Atonement! Can it be? Hallelujah, What a Savior!”

II. The disciples must be delivered from self-preservation. 9:30-32. Jesus restates the necessity of His suffering. (8:31-32a) He will state it again in 10:32-34. The first section of the gospel of Mark focuses on the identity of Jesus as the Christ. The pivotal moment in the book is when Peter proclaims, “You are the Christ.” Then he rejects Jesus’ prediction of His suffering and death. The imbalance in Peter’s understanding of Jesus as the conquering Christ is reinforced up on the mountain when He sees Him in all His glory. It is difficult to reconcile an exalted savior with a suffering servant. The disciples have a hard time balancing these two realities. So do we.

No one wants to suffer. It runs counter to our natural instinct of self-preservation. That is why it is not uncommon for a person who receives a diagnosis of a fatal disease to ask, “Why me?” Of course the answer to that question is, “Why not you?” None of us gets out of this thing alive but we are surprised to learn that we are one of them! This world is rigged. John says, “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” That means every follower of Christ will be opposed; opposed not just by some radical jihadist but by the culture, the state, your co-workers, even your own natural instincts. In Acts 14 we read about the gospel spreading like crazy in spite of the message of Paul and Barnabas who went about preaching, “through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom of God.” There is tremendous joy and peace in following Christ but there is also suffering. Losing the balance between the two leads to despair.

III. The disciples must be delivered from self-promotion...9:33-37. How is it possible for these guys to be talking about who is the greatest? First, rank was important in the

Jewish culture. Jesus once warned about attending a wedding feast and seeking the place of honor. Where you sat was a big deal. But there may have also been some discussion about why Peter, James and John were invited to see Jesus transfigured and the others weren't. Whatever the source of the argument, Jesus used the opportunity to emphasize once again that Christianity is marked by service and not status. **The true mark of a follower of Jesus is not status but service.**

Jesus illustrates this in an interesting way. He calls a child over and stands him in the middle of the disciples. The child represents the lowliest disciple who has big needs and little status. To serve someone like that is to serve Jesus Himself. The true test of service is not how many awards we have received for serving but by how we treat those who can do nothing for us in return.

IV. The disciples must be delivered from self-importance. 9:38-41. In Mt. 12:30 we read, "Whoever is not with me is against me." Sounds like a contradiction with this passage. But that context had to do with the resistance shown by the Pharisees. In this case a man is casting out demons in the name of Jesus. The disciples object to his unauthorized use of Jesus' name. He was not "ordained" as they were. In their minds they were the ones who were authorized, deputized, legalized, legitimized, organized, recognized and utilized by Jesus to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus sets them straight.

How can we be delivered from our self-sufficiency? There is only one way - by keeping our balance between the good news and the bad news of the gospel. The bad news is that we are more self-centered than we ever imagined. The good news is that we are more loved, accepted and forgiven than we ever dreamed possible. That's the gospel. The reason we desperately need the gospel is because we are born with a preoccupation with self. We think that we can live our lives in such a way that God will see how good we are and will be convinced that we deserve His love. Or we think that God will discover how bad we are and withdraw His love from us. Some people even know that we are saved by grace but they view grace as some kind of supplemental "gap insurance." I do the best I can and when I come up short grace kicks in to supplement my best efforts. That's gap insurance. That's NOT the gospel. The gospel is "I need Thee. Every hour I need Thee."

The bad new is you are going to lose your balance. The good news is you are wire walking over a net. It's called the gospel. If only Karl Wallenda had been walking the wire over a safety net, he would have survived his fall. But he wasn't. You are. Attempt great things for God and, even if you lose your balance and fall, you fall right into the palm of His hand. We can attempt great things for God because we are working over a net. When you blow it this week, just remember, He's got this.