



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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**The Agnostic In Me**

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**Mark 9:14 - 29**

### INTRODUCTION

How many of you have experienced an answer to prayer in the last year?

How many of you have experienced unanswered prayer in the last year?

- By “unanswered”, I mean for all practical purposes it appears God has chosen not to answer your prayer. Maybe He’s up to something else; but it’s not apparent at this point.

Many (probably “all”) of us have experienced failure in prayer. Failure to see anything change as a result of having spent time in prayer. Failure that leaves us thinking:

- “I’m not good at this. I’m going to leave this to the ‘experts’” (i.e.: prayer warriors).
- “God really isn’t interested in my struggles; He hears and answers others (but not me).”
- “Why should I trust God? He’s let me down (more than once).”

And so, we don’t pray much. We tend to feel like it doesn’t make any difference. . .like it doesn’t really do any good to pray. I struggle with this a lot. I pray with lots of people lots of times each week. But sometimes I wonder if it does any good. The agnostic in me says, “Nothing will be different; whatever’s going to happen is going to happen” (remember “*Que Sera, Sera*”). My ho-hum attitude leads me to not take prayer as seriously as I ought or want.

Maybe that’s true for you too. And possibly for us collectively as the people of God.

There’s a story in the New Testament reading we did this week that speaks to the agnosticism that’s in all of us. It’s found in **Mark, chapter 9**. Please turn in your Bibles to that chapter.

The chapter starts with Jesus up on a mountain with Peter-James-John being transfigured (glori-fied) before their very eyes, while the other disciples are down below having a hard time of it.

How reminiscent of Moses up on Mt. Sinai getting the 10 Commandments. Remember how he came down and found the people in disarray (i.e.: making a golden calf)? Asked: “Can’t I leave you for just a little while?”

Jesus must have come down with His face and his whole body glistening (like Moses from this mountain-top experience). But how frustrating—for both of them!

He finds his Disciples embroiled in arguments with the “teachers of the law”. The Scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees were constantly hounding Jesus and His Disciples. . .constantly trying to entrap them in order to discredit them. . .constantly opposing them with their rigid, dogmatic nitpicking.

In the chaos, a distraught father had brought his son to the Disciples. This little boy had all the signs and symptoms of epilepsy [**v. 18**: he was foaming at the mouth, gnashing his teeth, periodically stiff & rigid, and couldn’t talk]. Surely a brain tumor or chemical imbalance could cause such convulsive fits. But it was more than that. **Mark 9:17** tells us the boy was “*possessed by a spirit / demon*”—one of those

“principalities and powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” that Paul wrote about in **Ephesians 6:12**—a being of incredible craft and power. A very difficult thing to handle!

I don't know that they would have done any better if it was a “simpler” condition of epilepsy. The fact is, Jesus is frustrated at their lack of faith. He vents his frustration in **v. 19**: “O unbelieving generation! How long shall I put up with you?”

Let's pick up the story in v. 20. Read **vv. 20-29**:

<sup>20</sup>And they brought the boy to Jesus. 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.

<sup>21</sup>Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. <sup>22</sup>"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."

<sup>23</sup>"If you can?" said Jesus. "**Everything is possible for him who believes.**"

<sup>24</sup>Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "**I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!**"

<sup>25</sup>When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

<sup>26</sup>The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." <sup>27</sup>But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

<sup>28</sup>After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

<sup>29</sup>He replied, "**This kind can come out only by prayer.**" [Some manuscripts say “prayer and fasting”.]

Why couldn't the Disciples drive out the evil spirit?

Jesus had chosen them, trained them, and sent them off into towns & villages in the region and given them authority over evil spirits and the ability to heal. We're told in **Mark 6:13**: “They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.” Yet on this occasion, they fumbled the ball. Why?

The reason for their failure is twofold (and the two things are intertwined). It had to do with:

- 1) Their attitude toward faith;
- 2) Their attitude toward prayer.

#### FIRST, THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD FAITH

What is faith? There are so many dimensions and aspects. This is the understanding I believe Jesus is driving toward in this passage:

- ❖ *Confidence* (in God even when it appears unrealistic, ridiculous, or foolish)

When it comes to faith, we make two mistakes:

- 1) We tend to put more faith in our faith (i.e.: how I exercise it) than in God;
- 2) We tend to quantify faith (i.e.: make a virtue out of how much I have).

The D's might have gotten a little overconfident. They may have started relying on their own ability to produce a certain result or effect. Here they are confronted with this young boy, and I can almost hear them thinking: “We can do this. We did it just last week. Jesus showed us how. We just say the words and ‘boom’.”

That's always when we get in trouble—when we start relying on a learned formula, a technique, a recipe. That's putting more faith in our faith than in God. Faith is supposed to point to God (what He can do), not me (what I can do).

Then, we have a tendency to quantify faith. The more I have, the better.

Let's say I have this much, and it produces so much. You have this much, and it produces a little more or less accordingly. Church leaders, why they have more, so they produce even more. Work your way up the chain to Pastor Matt (i.e.: he's got the most cause he's the lead pastor)—so we can expect him to raise the dead. ☺☺☺

Now Jesus says in **v. 23**: *“Everything is possible for him who believes.”* But that “everything” actually doesn't depend on quantity. **Matthew's version says (17:21)**: *“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.”*

The proper attitude toward faith: It is the power of God (not my faith) that moves mountains. You see, anything is possible. . .nothing is too difficult for God. That's what this passage affirms. But not everything is guaranteed, certain, or in the bag—even if you do have a “lot” of faith. God will act according to His sovereign will, but not according to our will.

BTW, If you think of “mountains” as the difficulties, problems (e.g.: debt) that seem so big and unmovable: We need to get our eyes off our problems and challenges...and onto God. Otherwise, faith easily degenerates into “my own human effort” (e.g.: a lot of straining to make faith work.

Jesus used this occasion to teach them (and us) something about faith and prayer:

- ❖ Our faith does not have to be perfect.

Notice how the man in the account (the father) stands in stark contrast to the Disciples. If the Disciples were overconfident of their faith, this man was under-confident. He wasn't sure whether Jesus could do anything for his son's situation or not. But his cry of desperation was enough. Jesus was able to use him to demonstrate how little faith it really takes to get the attention of God.

We don't know too much about the man in this story. The Gospel writer doesn't give us much background. But we do know that he lived in a time that was inhospitable to faith—just as we do. Like ours, his was an age of competing ideologies and shifting values. His world was divided and subdivided by countless cults, philosophies, pagan religions. It was pretty hard to know what to believe in such a fragmented world.

So when Jesus said, *“Everything is possible for him who believes”*, the man gave a truly honest response: *“I do believe. But I have a lot of unbelief. Help me in that unbelief.”* Yes, I have faith, but it's not complete. . .it's not perfect. . .it's “partial”. But I want it to be more.

That was all it took. Jesus could read his heart. He spoke to the spirit disturbing the man's son, and the spirit departed. The little bit of faith the man had reached out and somehow made contact with the wonderful all-sufficient grace of God.

***“I believe; help my unbelief.”*** That's a prayer I suspect God really desires to answer.

“Perfect (doubt-free) faith” is not possible in this life. You will always be painfully aware of how small and inadequate it is. But God's plan is to take us from where we are to the next level and to the next and to the next—if we will let Him.

It is also true that your faith probably won't grow when everything is fine. It will more likely happen in times of trial and stress, in times of questioning and doubt—when it's not so easy to trust Him.

Remember, true faith is a decision in the face of all to the contrary that *Jesus is able*. . .an unwavering confidence in God, no matter what.

## SECOND, THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD PRAYER

Failure in faith is often due to a failure in prayer, which takes in failure to work a program of spiritual discipline.

I believe the Disciples did not embrace the importance of prayer. They did not take it seriously. I fear we don't either.

We know from the Gospel accounts that Jesus worked hard at maintaining a fresh and vigorous relationship with God. He was constantly in touch with His heavenly Father. That is where His power came from. He always walked in reliance upon God—drawing upon that connection.

Now when Jesus said (in v. 29) that “this kind comes out only by prayer”, He's not talking about a particular prayer that you say at the moment you are ministering to or praying over someone. No, we're talking about complete reliance upon God—maintained by a life (lifestyle) of prayer. The work facing them was not within their grasp or power; it was beyond them. [Same for us.]

Be warned however!

When you pray the enemy fights back (v. 20: the boy went into convulsions). And things may get worse for a time (v. 26: the evil spirit came out, but the boy appeared dead).

I can't tell you how prayer works this morning. It's a MYSTERY.

We have a prayer chain and a prayer e-mail. Does that mean having the whole church pray will make something happen quicker or better than if just 1-2 of us pray? Does 3 minutes of prayer move the mountain 3 inches, whereas 3 hours might move it 3 miles?

I don't know how all that works. I don't think there's a mathematical relationship between prayer and the results we seek:

- We've prayed for some. . . anointed them with oil. . . and seen God work powerfully;
- Other times we've prayed. . . but seen no change.

Why isn't everybody healed? It's always in God's power to heal;  
But not always in God's purpose to heal.

When God doesn't heal, that doesn't necessarily mean we lack faith. It's not necessarily a sign of weakness. We must remember, our confidence is in Him.

I want us (me) to take prayer much more seriously than we (I) have—regardless of the outcomes. The work of the church is still to cast out devils and the unclean spirits of sin, worldliness, selfishness, greed, infidelity, intemperance, dishonesty, et.al.

The faith which will be effectual to accomplish all this will be a faith exercised in prayer.

At the end of the day, I want my life AND our church to be explained by the fact that God did it! I want people to look at our church and say, “God is up to something there!”

## **STUDY GUIDE: The End of Mark; the Beginning of Luke**

**Monday: Read Mark 13.** How will the Son of Man come (vv. 24-27)? How does the “fig tree” lesson (vv. 28-29) answer the disciples' questions from v. 4 (also 11:12-14, 20-21)? What promises does Jesus give in vv. 30-31? How would this comfort (or discomfort) the disciples? What impact do these promises have on you, 21 centuries later? What is the most exciting thing to you about the Second Coming? The most distressing? How can you fulfill vv. 34 & 37: “*Be on guard! Be alert! Watch!*”?

**Tuesday: Read Mark 14.** How does the woman's actions in v. 3 strike you: Thoughtful, but misguided? Tasteful, but extravagant? Wasteful, no buts about it? Honoring to the n<sup>th</sup> degree? Do you think the perfume

could have been better spent? Why? How was her action justified by Jesus (vv. 6-9) and used by Judas (vv. 10-11)? How does the meal relate to the Passover (see Exodus 12)? What new meaning did Jesus give to the Passover bread? The wine? What vow did he make? What clue to the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection would later be provided by reference to the first Passover?

**Wednesday: Read Mark 15.** Why do the people, after witnessing Jesus' miracles, hearing his teachings, and praising him with hosannas, now demand that Jesus be crucified? Why does Pilate grant their request? What aspect of the crucifixion was the worst for Jesus: The physical pain? The spiritual separation from God? What causes his separation from the Father (see Habakkuk 1:13)? What does this say about our part in his crucifixion? How are the cry of Jesus (v. 34; also Psalm 22:1), the tearing of the temple curtain (v. 38; also Hebrews 10:19-22), and the faith of the centurion (v. 39) all related?

**Thursday: Read Mark 16.** Would you have had trouble believing the angel's words? Why or why not? Who did Jesus send to you to tell you he had risen? Did you have trouble believing that person? How were you finally convinced of Jesus' resurrection?

**Friday: Read Luke 1.** Make a list of the things for which Zechariah praises God (vv. 68ff). How does this song compare and contrast with Mary's (vv. 46-55)? What, according to this song, is the purpose of salvation? Of the promises listed in this song, which one means the most to you at this stage in your life? How has God unfolded his plan of salvation in your life? Who helped prepare the way? What were some key events that led you to your commitment to Jesus?