



## A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

### The One True Believer...

### Mark 9:14-29

Jesus had taken Peter, James and John and had gone up into the mountains to pray. It had been late in the afternoon and the remaining nine disciples had stayed in the village at the foot of the mountain. The nine had passed the night virtually in a state of euphoria. They were thrilled with the power Jesus had given them and they had been able to both proclaim the gospel and heal the sick.

They were flexing their spiritual muscles and they enjoyed it.

That morning they had decided to minister to others and for awhile they did some good. Then suddenly, the crowd parted and there he was. He was a middle-aged man and his face was ashen gray, worn down from years of grief and pain. His eyes were red and swollen and yet they pleaded as he spoke. The man asked them with a broken voice to look at His son. No, he did more than ask, he begged them to help his son. As he spoke, he pointed down to an emaciated figure at his feet really nothing more than a pile of bones wrapped in cloth. And then it moved. It was a boy but such a boy as the world had never seen. The pitiful bundle convulsed and flopped. The boy was grinding his teeth and his face, oh that face, was locked in a horrific grimace of pain. He was covered with scars, sores and scabs. He was foaming at the mouth.

One of the disciples may have bent down and touched the boy and prayed but the boy broke into convulsions. Another disciple may have rebuked the evil spirit in the boy but he continued to roll back and forth in the dust. There was sweat, and dirt and blood and there were convulsions and there was, well, there was that face, that horrible, pathetic, demonic face.

Then suddenly, as if from no where, the scribes were raising their voices, mocking them. "Can't you heal the boy? Maybe your Master's teaching is no good. If your Master was genuine surely you could heal one poor, pitiful boy."

They were dazed by the abuse. They were embarrassed and they wished they were somewhere else, anywhere else. They looked first at the mocking faces of the scribes, then at the crowd, and then at the pathetic boy. They could not bring themselves to look at the boy's father. They were undone. The roaring commotion of the crowd filled their ears and suddenly the faith and confidence they had enjoyed just moments before simply fluttered away.

And then there was Jesus.

We know from reading the gospels that He had been up in the mountains praying. We know that as He had prayed His face and His garments had been transfigured so that His face and clothes gleamed like the sun. We know that he had spoken to both Moses and Elijah concerning His coming death at Jerusalem.

We know that after Moses and Elijah had departed, God covered the place with an impenetrable cloud of darkness and had spoken out of the cloud for the benefit of Peter, James and John. God said:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Mark 9:7**...Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "**This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!**"

But we also know that the nine did not know what had happened. We know that the scribes would never have believed what had happened and we know that a desperate father was thinking only of his, poor, pitiful son. But that is where we pick up the story in Mark chapter 9, verse 14.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Mark 9:14**...When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

The first thing I notice is the persistent unbelief of the scribes. The scribes were much like the cheap, tabloid journalists that used to hound Princess Diana. They were always trying to catch Him in the wrong. They wanted so much to discredit Him. They often tried to ask Him questions to trip Him up but He always managed to show them for what they were, hypocrites. And they hated Him for it. Jesus had a way of exposing them in their sin. One example will, I think, suffice. Luke says:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Luke 20:19**...The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. <sup>20</sup> Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. <sup>21</sup> So the spies questioned him: "**Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.** <sup>22</sup> **Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar**

**or not?"** <sup>23</sup> He saw through their duplicity and said to them, <sup>24</sup> **"Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?"** <sup>25</sup> **"Caesar's,"** they replied. He said to them, **"Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."** <sup>26</sup> They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.

You see what they wanted. You see how He responded to them. He exposed them for what they were. Jesus did not even have a coin. The very thing they wanted to embarrass Him over they had to produce themselves. They wanted to blast him over His refusal to take a stance against Caesar, yet they were the ones carrying Caesar's coins. Ultimately, the problem was not Jesus but their own sin.

You see they had persuaded themselves that they were righteous. They had been commanded by John the Baptist and others to repent and believe the gospel. But they had persuaded themselves that Jesus' estimation of their sinfulness was all wrong. They needed no Savior because they had convinced themselves they were without sin, so when Jesus offered Himself as a Savior they hated Him. In this passage they were arguing with the nine. We don't know exactly what they said but it's easy to guess. They were rejoicing about the dilemma of the disciples, not because they cared one whit about the boy or even the disciples. They rejoiced because they wanted Jesus to fail and the failure of His disciples was the next best thing they could hope for.

It may be that you find yourself here this morning in the same state. Deep down you have this abiding resentment of Jesus not because of any flaw in Him but because He exposes you for what you are. You know you have not kept His commands and you know you need His mercy. Yet you cannot help yourself. If

that is where you find yourself I will have a word from the Lord for you in a moment.

The second thing I notice is the powerless unbelief of the disciples in the face of opposition.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Mark 9:16**... "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. <sup>17</sup> A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. <sup>18</sup> Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

It is frightening to think about the failure of the disciples. It is frightening because their failure is often our failure. They had seen Jesus accomplish miracles so many times. He had authorized them to do miracles; He had authorized them to preach the gospel. But now, they had come headlong against something that they had never expected. They had come headlong against evil of unimaginable power. It would not be moved. It would not respond to them at all. It mocked them in their unbelief. It tore through their puffed up self-confidence like it was a wet paper bag.

To encounter evil in all of its unbridled fury and to have absolutely no impact on it, to encounter evil and not be able to break it but rather be broken by it is, of course, the worst thing that can ever happen to a Christian. It is coming to terms with our own unconscious unbelief. The disciples did not believe in Jesus fully. I submit to you this morning that none of us do. Calvin was right when he said, "We are all partially unbelievers all our lives". We have seen the marvelous works of God in our own lives. We have experienced His presence in times of

pain and suffering and yet there is something in us that so easily forgets, that so easily fails in times of trial. It is a dreadful thing because most of the time we are unaware of its presence. It is only when opposition comes, or tragedy comes, or failure to believe as Christ would have us believe that we become aware, painfully aware of its presence.

And it doesn't take much to set it going: a visit to the doctor, a note from a mate of twenty years that we thought really loved us, a call from the police over a child that we were sure was finally going to make it. It can be the simplest thing and suddenly unconscious unbelief rears its head. It may be that you are a believer and that this morning you understand exactly what I am saying. It may be that your own doubts and fears have just about pushed you to the edge of your faith. If that is the case, in a moment, I will have a word from the Lord for you.

The third thing I notice from this text is the unwilling unbelief of the father. That is, of course, a strange way to say it, but it's the right way. The boy's father did not want to not believe; he just could not help himself. There was too much history, there was too much pain. Listen to Mark in chapter 9, verse 19.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Mark 9:19... "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."**

Hear those terrible words of Jesus, **"O unbelieving generation."** How they must have stung the disciples. How they must have angered the scribes. How they must have discouraged the boy's father. And then there was Jesus' question.

Look at verse 20.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Mark 9:20...** 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. <sup>21</sup> Jesus asked the boy's father, "**How long has he been like this?**" "**From childhood,**" he answered.

What a terrible question for Jesus to ask, "How long has this been happening to him." Now, imagine with me for a moment all of the memories that question must have stirred up for the father. He would have thought back to happier days when the lad was just a toddler. He would have thought back to days when his precious son was growing and laughing. He would, of course, also thought back to that first day when the dark cloud of possession had reared its ugly head. He would have thought back to the first day when those laughing eyes had turned dark and foreboding. He would have remembered the first convulsion, the first wild look, the first moment of madness. The father answered Jesus.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Mark 9:21...** 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.**"

The culmination of years of grief and tragedy and shame burst forth from the father's lips. It was as if he were recalling all at the same time the wonderful things he had heard Jesus had done, the mocking laughter of the scribes and the powerlessness of the disciples. He was at his wit's end and he simply cried out, "Help, if you can help. Sir, will you not have pity."

I would have expected that Jesus would have had pity at that point. I would have expected that that was the response He wanted. He had, of course, purposely caused the man to reflect on his own terrible estate with the question,

“How long has he been like this?” But He was not yet through with the boy’s father. Instead of kindness, there is one last twist of self-examination that He wanted for the boy’s father. Instead of healing the boy quickly, he rebukes the father,

**<sup>NIV</sup> Mark 9:23...“If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.”**

Now, I want you to think about the implications of what Jesus said. It is not superficial kindness; it is genuine godly, compassion. You see the problem was not Jesus. Jesus’ power was not in question. The problem was the father. Jesus lacked neither compassion or power. He had come into the world to save sinners and that act was to be God’s revelation of both His compassion and power. What Jesus wanted, I think, was to wipe out he last few vestiges of this poor father’s self-confidence. What Jesus wanted was to kick the last few props out. What Jesus wanted was for the man to put all his hope, all his prayers, all his shattered self-confidence in Him. You see in a very real sense Jesus was and is the one true believer in the world. And from what happens next in the text, it is obvious that that was what Jesus achieved.

**<sup>NIV</sup> Mark 9:24...Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”**

The dad could bear it no longer. His desperation, his shame, his hopelessness all merge into one volcanic eruption of emotion. “Lord, I do believe, but look at my boy. Lord, I do believe yet this one thing, this poor pitiful boy and the poor pitiful nature of the thing stand in the way. Oh Lord, help this boy, help this my unbelief!”

There is something even more pitiful about this father that is clear from the Greek text that does not come across very well in our English Bible. You see the phrase, "I believe. Help thou my unbelief!", was written in the present tense. The idea is that the phrase is durative or repetitive. You see the boy's father just kept on saying it over and over. That idea is expressed in our English Bible as "he began saying" but it is easy for us to miss. You see what he actually said was something more like, "I believe. Help my unbelief. I believe. Help my unbelief. I believe. Help my unbelief." There is a pleading, a begging that just does not come across in English.

And then Jesus acts.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Mark 9:25...** 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.

When Jesus saw the crowd was gathering toward them. He acted. His action, of course, leads us all to speculate why He waited. Was it because He wanted others to come to the same crisis of faith before they believed? Was it because He wanted others to believe on the basis of His words and not just on the basis of the miracles? I do not know the answer to all those questions. I suspect that what Jesus did He did for those who were actually involved. It was for those who were fighting their own demons of persistent unbelief. It was for those whose faith had faltered in the face of opposition. It was for the father beaten down by his own unwilling unbelief. Most of all, most of all, it was for this poor, pitiful boy.

And look what he does. He rebukes the evil spirit. He commands it to come out. And He commands it never, ever, to go into the boy again. There had been enough pain, there had been enough suffering. In this case, with this boy, Jesus was making an end.

But look for just a moment at the way Mark describes the story. The evil spirit fought and struggled; it resisted. But it could not resist. It came out with great commotion and with extraordinary resistance. But it came out nevertheless. It seemed for a moment that the boy had died. Imagine how the father must have felt in that one brief instance when the spectators began to shout out, **“He’s dead! He’s dead!”**

Then think about how the father felt when Jesus reached down and pulled the boy up. Think about how the father felt when the boy, who for the first time in a long time with those laughing eyes turned to his father and said, **“Dad?”** You see that is the wonder of Jesus. He believed for the father. He accomplished for the father what the father’s unwilling unbelief could not. And that is the message from the Lord that I have for many of you this morning. I know some of you are distraught with your children, your mates, your parents. You cannot understand why they do not come to Christ. You cannot understand why they do not come along. You have prayed, many of you for years to no avail and you are heartsick. You have come to the place where you want to cry out with the father, **“Lord, I believe! Help, thou, my unbelief.”** I submit that that is a good thing. Jesus is there and He hears, He even believes. He is and was the one true believer in the world.

For those of you who are bogged down by persistent doubt and unbelief, the prayer is the same. You have looked out into the impenetrable void of your own unbelief and you do not see anyway out. Pray this prayer, **“Lord, I believe! Help, thou my unbelief.”** Jesus is and was the one true believer in the world and He is there and He hears and we have His promise:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Matthew 11:28**...“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Finally, for those of you who are believers but have been beaten up in the course of your ministry. The prayer is the same, **“Lord, I believe! Help, thou, my unbelief.”** You see Jesus is there providing the power and the faith to keep us going. He is there to sustain us when opposition and troubles arise. He is the Author and He is the Finisher of our faith. When we are beaten down by the world and its cares, when we are stripped of all of our self-confidence we are driven to something far greater, far more substantial. We are driven to the cross and the love and mercy and faithfulness of Jesus. It is only when we see our inadequacy, it is only when we cast ourselves in despair on Him that we can begin to really see the magnitude of His glory.

Two centuries ago there was an English clergyman named Robert Robinson. In addition to his gifts as a pastor and preacher, he was an accomplished poet and hymn writer. After many years in the ministry he began to drift in his spiritual life. He left the ministry and traveled to France where he sank further into sin and lost his assurance. One night he was riding in a carriage with a Parisian socialite who had recently become a believer. She was reading some poetry to him and asked, **“And what do you think of this one?”**

*Come thou Fount of every blessing,  
Tune my heart to sing thy grace.  
Streams of mercy never failing  
Call for hymns of loudest praise.*

When she looked over at him she noticed that he was crying. **"What do I think of it?"** she asked. He paused for a moment and then in a broken voice he answered, **"I..., I wrote it; but now I've drifted away from Him and can't find my way back."**

"But don't you see?" said the woman quietly, **"The way back is written right here in the third line of your poem: 'Streams of mercy never ceasing'-Those streams are flowing even here in Paris tonight."**

Robinson recommitted his life to Christ and regained his blessed assurance. That streams of mercy ever flow for the wayward Christian is the vital difference for the child of God. We may not feel very sure of our salvation but God's promise remains eternal, unshaken by our foolish unbelief. Mercy is extended toward us sinners in the strong paw of the Lion of Judah and He is up to the task, He is and was the one true believer in the world.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,

We are encumbered by our sin and by our unbelief.

We recognize that in ourselves,

We have neither the ability to obey

Or the even the strength to believe.

We praise you Father

That you sent Christ into the world

To Obey on our behalf  
To suffer Your justice on our behalf  
Even to believe on our behalf.  
We exalt You O Father  
For Your kindness in Christ  
And we exalt the Lord Jesus  
For His faithfulness.  
Now Father, renew our minds  
Endow us with your Spirit  
To move us to obedience and  
To move us ever toward Christ  
The One True Believer in the World.  
In His Name we Pray  
Amen