

“I Believe; Help My Unbelief!”
Mark 9:14-29
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I’m the singles pastor here at Briarwood and before we get into the Scripture for this study, I want to share with you something Charles Spurgeon shared in one of his sermons. His sermon title was “Desire of the Soul in Spiritual Darkness.” He said “I think, when a man says, ‘I never doubt,’ it is quite time for us to doubt him. It is quite time for us to begin to say, ‘Ah, poor soul, I am afraid you are not on the road at all, for if you were, you would see so many things in yourself, and so much glory in Christ more than you deserve, that you would be so much ashamed of yourself, as even to say, ‘It is too good to be true.’” Spurgeon who is no stranger to doubt himself, shares what most of already know and that is, it’s normal for Christians to doubt. A man like Spurgeon who is called the Prince of Preachers with an incredible ministry doubted and even recognizes the doubt in others. We all have something at times that haunts us that we don’t understand or were not sure what to do about. So, how are we to respond when we are confronted with doubt?

To answer that question, I want to look at three types of doubt from this Mark 9 passage. We will look at a mocking doubt, a functional doubt and hopeful doubt. I want to give a little context to this passage before we get into it. Jesus had just descended down from the Mount of Transfiguration where He had taken Peter, James and John. Jesus is heading back to the rest of the Disciples and He encounters this scene from Mark 9.

Mark 9:14-29 says [14] *And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. [15] And immediately all the crowd, when they saw Him, were greatly amazed and ran up to Him and greeted him. [16] And He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” [17] And someone from the crowd answered Him, “Teacher, I brought my son to You, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. [18] 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.” [19] And He 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.” [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. [21] And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. [22] 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.” [23] And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.” [24] Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” [25] 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.” [26] 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.” [27] But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. [28] And when He had entered the house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” [29] And He said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” Let’s pray.*

Prayer:
Lord, we thank You for this passage of Scripture that we are getting ready to study and that You healed this boy engaging with the doubt of his father and that You taught many ministry

principles to the Disciples for us to learn. We pray Father that You meet us as we study Your Word and that Your Word would be transforming in our lives as we deal with our own doubts and that we would apply Scriptural principles to them. Help us to trust You and proclaim You in a lost and dying world. Allow us to make much of Jesus to honor You with Your Word and be living and active in our souls. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

We will begin by looking at the first of the three doubts I mentioned – mocking doubt. I define mocking doubt as criticism with the intent to shame rather than believe – it's doubting toward unbelief. We see this with the Scribes in this passage. One of the highlights in Jesus' earthly ministry was to find a crowd in an uproar. The Scribes and the Disciples that didn't go with Jesus to the Mount of Transfiguration were arguing over something that caused a great commotion. It must have been some debate to draw this massive crowd around them. The text never really tells us what they are arguing about but the context of the story would lead us to believe that the Scribes are mocking the Disciples inability to heal this boy and therefore even the legitimacy of Jesus' ministry. They might have been saying things like, "You call yourselves followers of this new Way, you're unlearned, unschooled, you're not part of the rabbinical school, so who are you?" That could have really gotten under the Disciples' skin and they were probably already a little embarrassed that they couldn't help this boy. Now, they have these rivals sticking their nose in it. They faced mocking doubt.

Interestingly, we see this often in Jesus' ministry with those that doubt and mock Him, that these Scribe never believe. Even as Jesus arrives on the scene and heals the boy they don't ever say 'wow, we made a mistake, we were wrong.' They never believe as far as we can tell. This happens time and time again when Jesus does His miracles. When Jesus does His work people mock Him and His followers and they never believe even in the face of the miraculous. This shouldn't surprise us because Scripture tells us to expect this. Romans 1 teaches us that we suppress the truth and would rather believe a lie. We don't want to know God, His way, His salvation or His truth and we know we have an enemy that hates us, wants to attack us, our faith and the legitimacy of Jesus. So, we shouldn't be surprised in the world that we live that we will face mocking doubt, ridicule, and criticism for the hope that we have. People say to us 'how can you believe that God descended on the earth and forgave the sin of His followers on a cross because that sounds crazy?' We should expect that.

What do we do when we face this mocking doubt? I Peter 3:15 gives us the answer and it says *[15] but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.* Here He tells us to honor, worship and hold fast to Christ and then to be prepared to give an answer to their rejections. How do we do that? We don't respond to their anger, their hatred in kind, no we respond with gentleness, respect, love, grace and mercy.

Practically, what does this look like? As we are faced with this type of doubt, mocking, criticism, and ridicule for our belief, we pray. We say, 'Lord, give me strength in this season, in this time and words to say to answer their doubt, their criticism.' The Apostle Paul often said to the Lord to give him words to say and if Paul needs it how much more do we need it? Lord, help me to recall Scripture and reason to defend the faith. That's the Spirit to create faith in their hearts. The reality is that the only reason we believe is because of grace. We didn't figure something out. It is purely by the mercy of God that we believe. We had a hard heart and doubted Him before Christ entered our hearts. We need the Holy Spirit to show up in their lives – give them eyes to see and ears to hear. Otherwise, our answers to their objections will be like a

BB gun shooting at a tank – it will bounce right off. No matter how knowledgeable we are we need the Holy Spirit to create faith in their heart so we ask Him for that.

Then we are to ask good questions. We doubt their doubts. We give answers the best that we can and we're not afraid to say we don't know. God is an infinite God so we don't have all the answers and it's what makes Him God and we're not. It's okay not to have all the answers. We have the most important answers. Often when I get into conversations with people talking about Jesus, they tend to want to talk about all these peripheral things. They can be important things but I always try to navigate the conversation back to Jesus, back to the Gospel. The Gospel is what is going to change their hearts. Romans 10:17 says [17] *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.* People can be wrong about peripheral things but let's talk about Jesus and His message. Everyone will have to deal with that one day. As we point people to Jesus, share the Gospel and our testimony, then we move on for we trust the Lord to move. We pray for them.

I like to say that my wife came out of the womb being discipled. She has an incredible family. She grew up in a great church that was intentional. She had a small group way before people even think about having a small group. She has had and still has mentors in her life. She was involved with a pretty significant camp ministry called Pine Cove that shaped her dramatically. She even did an intensive summer with a ministry called the Baby Ruth program to be discipled, equipped and prepared to be a minister of the Gospel to a lost world. Her closest companions all believe. She was in a bubble and then by God's Providence she ends up at a college in Charleston that was 16 hours away from her family and that bubble. That bubble popped open pretty quickly when she got to college for our college wasn't known to be promoting Christianity or to even be excited about it at all. She went from being in the majority to being in the minority in professing Christ.

She gets to her college history 101 class – Western Civilization – and one of the books in that class that is required reading is Misquoting Jesus by Bart Ehrman which attacks the reliability and authority of Scripture. How do you respond when a professor who grades you starts attacking your faith and doing so very intelligently? She asks a mentor of hers and basically gives her the advice of I Peter 3 – ask good questions but do so with gentleness and respect. Don't embarrass the professor in the classroom, perhaps meet him in his office, but point him to truth – to Scripture and answer his objections. That advice shook the rest of her four years she had in college. So, we respond to mocking doubt by being prepared to give a reason for our hope with gentleness and respect.

The second kind of doubt that we can face is functional doubt. Functional doubt can be defined as relying on your own strength, gifts and abilities rather than on the Lord. In this Mark 9 passage we see this with the Disciples. We don't see them displaying functional doubt directly by questioning Jesus or their calling but we do see them a little dumbfounded. Jesus had already given them the power to cast our demons in Mark 6:7 which says [7] *And He (Jesus) called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.* Yet here they are embarrassed and wondering why they couldn't do what they previously were able to do.

Jesus helps them understand. First, He rebukes their lack of faith. Mark 9:19 says [19] *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 talking to here? It could certainly be applied to the Scribes and the onlooking crowd but it was primarily directed at the Disciples. He is showing them that their inability to heal this boy was connected to their lack of

faith and Jesus is a little frustrated. He has three years to get these Disciples ready to establish the New Covenant Church and they still don't get it. He just came down from the Mount of Transfiguration with His top three – Peter, James and John and they didn't even know what to do with all that happened up there and the other nine are struggling with a lack of faith.

Secondly, Jesus tells His Disciples they were relying on their giftedness and not on the Lord. Mark 9:28-29 says [28] *And when He had entered the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"* [29] *And He said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."* He isn't saying this is a higher level of demon to cast out but He is rebuking the Disciples because they have forgotten something very important in the midst of this ministry. They forgot to pray first and it's a simple truth. They were relying on their own strength, gifts and abilities and not on Him – for the Spirit to move. That is where they failed and He was teaching them an important lesson. When we rely on our own strength for the Lord to move, we display functional doubt and we act as if it doesn't matter if God shows up.

How do we respond to our own functional doubt? We repent of our self-reliance and we abide in Christ. Jesus says in John 15:5, [5] *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, **for apart from Me you can do nothing.*** How many of us really believe the end of that statement? We may so we do intellectually and can articulate it to others but I can go day in and day out without actually living that out and it shows itself in our prayers. How well are we depending on the Lord? What does it mean to abide in Christ? It's actually pretty simple – it means we give ourselves to prayer and the Bible. Any preacher will tell you that and if they don't then go find another preacher. This is not simply something we are told to do but it's vital to our spirituality because without it we're powerless.

Charles Spurgeon was one of the most famous preachers of all time for he was a Godly man. There is a picture of him at the Metropolitan Tabernacle that seated 5,000 and had another room for an additional thousand. He had an incredible influence and was the most popular preacher of his day and continues to be so. People are still reading his sermons. People would come to his church and be amazed at it and Spurgeon would say 'Come with me for I want to show you the boiler room.' A boiler room is in a basement, kinda gross, smelly and pretty hot. In this room at his church there would be about a hundred people praying in this room and he would tell them 'This is the secret to my ministry – my people pray for me.' He would have people praying while he preached. This man was a Billy Graham before there was a Billy Graham. He understood for he was not going to rest on his abilities, talents and strength because he knew even if he preached the best sermon of his life it would still be nothing if the Spirit didn't move. He depended on the Lord and the Lord blessed His ministry.

Where is He showing up in my life, in yours and in our church? Briarwood has been so blessed over the church and we've seen so much fruit. This church at times can be a well-oiled machine but we're not perfect but by God's grace we are pretty good stewards of what God has given us. We have a lot of talented people here and many pastors here – incredible elders and deacons – and people giving their lives away. We have a lot of different ministries and programs here. Yet how easy it would be to rest in our strengths, abilities and our talents and not give our time and attention to prayer. We could have functional doubt where we could just coast and move along but what this church needs most is not a new program but people praying – interceding for lost souls, the preaching of God's Word, small groups, hurt and broken people and revival. Lord come, because if we go out in our own strength we will fail. I love the legacy of this church because it was founded off of prayer and the Word. Will our next generation of ministry mark us as well or will we display functional doubt?

The third doubt we will cover is hopeful doubt. I define hopeful doubt as questions and concerns with the intention of understand rather than distrusting. In Mark 9 we see this in the father of the boy possessed with a demon. He is greatly concerned with his demon possessed son and wants help. The symptoms of the son are that he is mute, has seizures, foaming of the mouth, grinding his teeth, rigid and moreover it seems like this demon can't decide whether to burn him to death or drown him. That's a pretty horrific scene. Put yourself in the father's shoes for a moment. Everything in you as a parent, longs to protect your child, love them and care for them. I have three children and I often say 'parenting makes you fragile.' I can't watch certain movies or news stories because it hits me too hard. You want to say 'take me not them.' Here is this father who has this son who has been demon possessed since childhood and he is powerless to do anything about it. This father can't help his son and he has probably tried everything.

Then this father hears about this small group of people led by a man named Jesus, walking around preaching about His Kingdom, healing people and casting out demons and just maybe this father is thinking 'this is who I'm looking for.' He shows up but Jesus isn't there but His students are and thinks they could probably help but they failed. How crushing that must have been for the father. Then a debate begins between the Scribes and Disciples and no attention is paid to the father and he's alone with his son who is still demon possessed. It's pretty devastating to think about especially for the father.

Jesus shows up and wants to know what is happening. The father has the courage to go and tell Him about his son and that His Disciples weren't able to cast out this demon from his son. I want you to see what the father says and how Jesus responds to him in Mark 9:21-24 says *[21] And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. [22] 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." [23] And Jesus said to him, "If you can"! All things are possible for one who believes."* [24] *Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"*

Interestingly, Jesus first asks a question to the father that makes no difference on the boy's healing for Jesus can heal this boy in an instant. Jesus probably already knows the answer to this question, so why ask the question? By Jesus asking this question, He is showing compassion to the father and on the son. Jesus is also connecting to him as a human being. He is showing that He sees the father. Secondly, He invites him to believe. We might read vs 23 and think Jesus is a little insulted by the father that the father questioned His ability, but I don't think that's what is going on here because He takes time to see and love this father and knows what he is struggling with. This father is probably at the end of his rope and Jesus is inviting him to believe. Maybe He is encouraging him to believe one last time because it's not about Jesus' ability but about the father's belief. Are you willing to put your faith in Me? Do you trust Me? The father responds with the most honest and incredible statement anyone could ever say – I believe; help my unbelief!

This teaches us that Jesus can handle our doubts. Perfect faith is not required to come to Him for we just come to Him as we are – with our imperfections, lack of faith. We don't have to have it together to come to Jesus. I've talked to too many people who say 'I'd like to come to Jesus but if He knew what I have done, He would never accept me' or 'I have to clean up some things in my life before I come to Him.' Time after time we see evidence in the Gospel of people coming to Jesus messy and here is one in Mark 9 – a man who was at the end of his rope saying 'I believe, help my unbelief.' Jesus heals his son.

Now the question is, how do we respond when faced with this type of doubt? Spurgeon said it is normal for the Christian to doubt because we all struggle with something at some time. Os Guinness talks about this splitting of mind between belief and unbelief. What do we do? First, remember that Jesus shows compassion to those who doubt. The Bible is filled with stories of people who struggle with doubt. Probably the most famous is doubting Thomas. Right after the resurrection the Disciples see Jesus except Thomas and they tell him Jesus rose from the grave and they saw Him but Thomas doesn't believe them. It says in John 20:24-25, [24] *Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. [25] So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe."* Then Jesus shows up. How does Jesus respond to Thomas?

Jesus doesn't rebuke or insult Thomas. It says in John 20:27-29 [27] *Then He (Jesus) said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."* [28] *Thomas answered Him, "My Lord and my God!"* [29] *Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* When we are struggling with doubts, fears, and anxieties Jesus says the same thing to us. He shows compassion on us for He can handle our doubts. He answers them by saying 'put your fingers here, put your hands here.' Jesus greets us and we see what it led Thomas to do and that was it led him to worship Him, which is what it should do to us when Jesus has compassion on us. Therefore, we can be honest to God about our doubt. He isn't going to rebuke you for your doubts, He is going to invite you deeper into a relationship with Him.

A question that goes unasked goes unanswered. So, we ask the question to our Lord. Secondly, we know that doubts can be used by God to strengthen your faith. Like Thomas, when we rightly examine our doubts knowing that we have to keep an open hand because He doesn't owe us any answers, we go to Him and He will lead us to worship Him and strengthen our faith. It will deepen our dependence on God and our knowledge of Him. We grow in Him. We grow in our compassion for others who are also struggling because you have been there and understand more of what they are going through. Show them what you have learned and help them like others have helped you. We develop a greater discernment in an age of confusion and we certainly need that as we examine these mocking doubts that come our way. We seek answers and reasons to believe. We can be a better Gospel witness – mold bold and competent. We are able and better equipped to give a reason for the hope that is within us. So, doubts can be an opportunity to grow your faith.

Third, we put on faith. Scripture tells us to put off and put on. So, how do I put on something that I'm struggling with? The Word tells us to. Ephesians 6 talks about putting on the armor of God and one of those things in the armor is the shield of faith. Ephesians 6:16 says [16] *In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one.* What are the flaming darts? They are half truths, false gospels and doubts. We take up faith and put it on as God has instructed us to do.

C.S. Lewis in his book Mere Christianity says 'Faith in the sense in which I'm using the word is the art of holding onto things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods. That is why faith is a necessary virtue unless you teach your moods where they get off, you can never be either a sound Christian or a sound atheist.' Lewis pointing to the fact that you have to have something that anchors your soul. What anchors you? Are you blown/carried away by your emotions? What is your faith in? It needs to be in Him and His Word.

Practically, this is what it looks like; to choose to believe the truth of Scripture over your fears. In spite of your doubts and circumstances, we preach the Word to ourselves. So often we listen to ourselves first and yet we need to quit that conversation and start a new conversation as we preach God's Word, His Gospel to our soul to stir up faith. As I said earlier, Romans 10:17 says [17] *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.* We learn to pray the way the Psalmist prays. The Psalms are covered with places where they fear, doubt and are anxious and they take it to the Lord in prayer telling Him what they are struggling with. Watch how the Psalmist prays – honestly, openly and with worship as they claim God's promises for, they preach it to themselves. Psalm 73 is a great example but there are many more than that one.

We need to identify the root causes of our doubts. Doubts are a symptom. What is feeding those doubts, causing it to develop? Is it an intellectual doubt, a moral doubt or commands in Scriptures or just our sin? Sometimes we doubt because it's easier to doubt than to put to death our sin. Perhaps we just need to repent. Seek to identify the root causes of your doubts. Next, we seek answers in the Word that address the root and then preach it to your soul.

Lastly, don't doubt alone. Christianity is a team sport. We need each other and help each other. We need to ask for help. We need accountability to help us with our struggles. There are seasons that we help people like that and we need to give them mercy and grace. Tell someone your doubts and struggles.

I've talked about everyone in this Mark 9 passage except the boy. He has this demon who is destroying him and he is helpless to do anything about it. He is passive in this story. Then Jesus heals him and he has this resurrection moment where goes from seemingly death to life. How do we understand him? Apart from Christ we are all the boy in this passage. We all have something destroying us and that's called sin and we're powerless to do anything about it. Romans 6:23 says [23] *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* We all have a death sentence but God sent Jesus to come to earth to deal with our sin – to cast it out, to pay for it on the cross, to take the full wrath of God on our behalf – so that we could walk, hear and see. He promises life now abundantly and He promises eternal life which we can't even fathom in the future. He's an incredible Savior who is not only compassionate with our doubts, but He experienced the hell that only we deserved to give us a heaven only He deserved. The question is, if you don't know Jesus today, then why, what is your doubts? Will today be the day that you say 'I believe; help my unbelief'? You don't have to come to Him with perfect faith or with it all together – you just come as you are and He washes you and helps you walk. Will you come to Him today? Let's pray.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we praise and thank You for Your Word and for the story in Mark 9 that happened in real time that we're still learning over 2,000 years later that informs our faith, helps us in our doubts, and encourages us. Help us to see that You're compassionate, loving and use our doubts to strengthen our faith. Help us when we say we believe in our unbelief. We pray for anyone reading this that don't know You as their personal Savior and that today would be the day that they place their full hope in You – that they may see that they have their sins paid for and may walk in newness of life. Have mercy on us O God and make us a church that depends mightily on prayer for You to move and that we wouldn't display functional doubt. Give us the grace when people mock us to give a reason for the hope that is in us with gentleness and respect and to be a Gospel witness in this world. We ask all this in Your Name, Amen.