

“THIS KIND OF EVIL”

by Steve Hammond, Sunday, March 10, 2019
Mark 9:14-32 at NFBC

//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.”//

—Mark 9:14-19 ESV

Earlier we had a healing of a blind man that Jesus did in two stages instead of just one step. In this way he illustrated the way his own disciples would have their eyes opened toward himself – not all in one step, but in two stages, the most difficult of which would be their coming to see and understand the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Now we have a boy with an evil spirit, which is also proving to go against the usual expectations established by Jesus. In chapter six, Jesus had sent out the Twelve, two by two, and gave them the authority to heal and to cast out demons. And they did so in Jesus’ name. There’s no record or hint that they had had any trouble casting out any demons.

But while Jesus was up on the mountain with Peter, James and John, the other disciples were finding themselves utterly unable to cast out the demon from this boy. This was drawing a crowd and evidently critical questions from the scribes, not to mention total frustration from the boy’s father. He had expected to be bringing the boy to Jesus himself and found only nine of the Twelve apostles waiting for Jesus to return. None of whom were having any success with that demon.

When Jesus does get back, finds the commotion, and gets the story from the boy’s father, he doesn’t simply fix everything. Neither with a single word, nor with a two step process. What Jesus does is express a great frustration with most everyone around him. “O faithless generation,” he says, “how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?”

Then again, when the boy’s father makes his appeal to Jesus by asking, “... if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus responds by pressing the man. “‘If you can’t! All things are possible for one who believes.” And this prompts the boy’s father to reply with one of the most ‘user friendly’ verses in the Bible. “I believe; help my unbelief!”

After this Jesus casts the demon out of the boy. It makes for an unusually dramatic scene where the boy is so convulsed by the demon as it leaves, that the boy seems to be dead. He isn't. But when Jesus helps him get up it looks similar to his raising him from the dead.

Then finally, when Jesus and the disciples are alone, they ask him privately why it was they were unable to cast the demon out of the boy. Jesus doesn't chastise them. (Though he may have included them in his original expression of frustration back at the scene.) Instead he simply answers them by indicating this was a different level of demonic evil. And so "this kind" cannot be driven out by anything "but prayer."

Belief and prayer.

Jesus mentions prayer here as essential for dealing with "this kind" of evil. But earlier he had said to the boy's father he needed only to believe for all things to be possible.

The two are related. Whereas the boy's father had been praying in a sense to Jesus in asking him to "help us," he had not exactly been expressing belief in Jesus to be able to do anything. And whereas the disciples may well have believed in Jesus and his power to cast out demons, they had evidently been trying to cast out the demon without a prayer-dependent relationship to their true source of power. We don't have the specifics, but we do have Jesus' reference to prayer – and the implication of its absence in the failure of the disciples to cast it out of the boy.

Now someone might point out that Jesus doesn't pray before casting out the demon either. But that's not exactly true. The whole experience on the Mount of Transfiguration had been centered on prayer. Neither Mark nor Matthew mention this, but Luke does. He notes that they went up the mountain to pray and it was while Jesus was praying that he was transfigured (Luke 9:28-29). And we also know that most of Jesus' prayer life is not recorded at all in the scriptures. He not only sought out lonely places to pray, he also kept most of his prayers between himself and his heavenly Father. Only a handful of them are recorded in the Gospel scriptures. Just as he taught in the Sermon on the other Mountain ("...when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.") in Matthew 6:6.

Obviously Jesus is not speaking of a formulaic prayer being essential for "this kind" of evil. He's talking about a prayer of true belief and right dependence upon God. Not a perfunctory thing to say prior to encountering a demon, but an all-encompassing state of mind and heart fostered by encountering the living God.

Belief and prayer. These are the two things essential for overcoming “this kind” of evil.

Is this because this kind of evil was stronger than your average kind of evil? Yes. In some sense, yes. There are some kinds of evil that don’t require much in the way of faithful belief or prayer toward God. Government can pass laws and keep order without prayer or belief in God. A police force and fire department can prevent and solve crimes and fight fires and rescue people without belief in God and prayer to him. I’m not saying that would be wise. I’m not saying there wouldn’t be trouble down the road for ignoring God. I’m just saying such work can be done to a large extent on our own human power and authority. We get that power and even that authority from God, so we would be wise to rightly believe it and acknowledge it in prayer. But God’s not going to cut off his power to those who fail to pray. From Nebuchadnezzar to Nero, God curbed many evils through human leaders and their governments, even when their beliefs and prayers were absent toward the living God.

Not so when it comes to demons. Not so when it comes to the spiritual battlefields where the swords and shields are directly related to what one believes and by what authority in which one speaks.

Look again at what was going on when Jesus arrived at the scene of his disciples losing their battle against the scribes, the crowd, the father, the boy... all because they were losing the battle against that demon.

Jesus speaks out against them all. “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” It’s as if he is having to push back all the unbelief that has been pressing in on everyone there – and *now* is trying to press in upon him. As if it would suffocate him if he let it.

This whole world is contagiously infected with unbelief. It feeds off it like some toxic germ of perverse pleasure. It sees a terrible evil take place and immediately doubts of God’s goodness and existence arise. It sees a person of integrity stumble and it laughs; a man of goodness falls into sin and it delights and despairs. And behind it all are the demons and the devil himself. And you don’t confront them with some belief based on platitudes, or words based on some mere human badge of authority. “This kind” takes right belief and righteous prayer. It takes a truth that cannot be undermined by demonic lies. It takes a word of authority that comes from the very highest of all authorities and a recognition on the part of both parties – demonic and disciple.

But right now it would seem no one but Jesus is quite there. The boy’s father doesn’t quite believe. The disciples aren’t quite praying, and the crowd is just blowing whichever way the wind blows.

So how is it the boy ever gets freed from the demon?

Well, of course, Jesus does it himself. Evidently this kind takes Jesus.

Do you think Jesus succeeded on account of a kind of spiritual 'brut strength' that really doesn't depend on right belief and righteous prayer? To believe that would be to deny that Jesus came and walked among us as one of us. That he was truly human as well as truly divine. It would be to deny the importance of his being baptized and anointed by the Holy Spirit at the beginning of his ministry, prior to his doing any of his miracles. It would be to deny the importance of Jesus own understanding of himself as grounding for his own right beliefs. It would be to deny the importance of Jesus' own prayers.

You can be sure Jesus cast out that demon in the same way he would call his disciples to cast out the demons. And when they failed, he would teach them more and he would have them pray more. And he would die before he would let any of them be defeated by the devil himself and a whole world full of demons!

In fact, that's exactly why he did die. So his disciples would see for themselves that not even death itself could defeat them, as it cannot defeat their Lord and Master. In this way they will have the right belief that comes from their understanding of the Gospel. And they will be able to pray in the very name of Jesus, God's Son, and know they speak according to the very highest authority in the land and sky and heaven itself. So before them the demons will fall and the gates of hell will crumble.

This is why Jesus doesn't go into an elaborate lesson on how to cast out demons with his delinquent disciples. Instead, he teaches them yet again about the necessity of his appointment with death at the hands of sinners. After which he will rise on the third day. They don't understand. Their eyes of belief still are not quite clear. But Jesus isn't done with them yet.

Is there an evil you are facing that seems insurmountable? Something far beyond what the world could ever hope to remedy or cure or cast out? Something a loved one is facing? Something that pushes you beyond what you mean when you say, "I believe"? Something for which you need to add, "help my unbelief"?

It seems our prayer list deals with such things every week. People's health needs going beyond what the doctors know, and beyond what people's bodies can endure. Family situations with evil right in the middle of it, taking over and taking away hope. And the spiritual matters can be the worst. Praying for loved ones blinded by the world, needing to be set free from a power that desires to destroy them.

Take heart. Jesus is not simply going to have you believe harder and pray harder. He is going to call you to believe in what you already believe and pray to the One whose name you already know. For your victory is already found in Jesus.

The Gospel a Mack 9:14-32

A Stupid, Strangling Spirit and Prayer

14 Back at Bailey Island they come upon the rest a the disciples at the head a Mackerel Cove. There they saw a great crowd gatherin', n' some lawyers asking lots a questions. 15 Immediately all the crowd, when they saw Josh, was excited, and come running ta greet him. 16 He asked the lawyers, "What are *you* up to?"

17 One man in the crowd answered instead, saying, "Teacher, I brought to yuh my son, who's got a wicked strangling spirit. 18 It's always throwing him down, n' making him foam at the mouth, n' grinding his teeth. He's just wasting away. I asked your disciples ta cast it out of him, but they was gettin' nowhere with it."

19 Josh winced at them last words. Then he spoke. "What a breathlessly unbelieving generation all around me. I'm surrounded. How long before I should also drown amongst yuh? How long should I hold my breath for yuh? Bring him to me."

20 They brought the boy to him, and when the spirit saw Josh, it immediately recoiled, causing the boy ta fall on the ground, convulsing and foaming at the mouth.

21 Josh asked the boy's father, "How long's he been this way?"

He said, "Since he was a child. 22 It seems ta want ta kill him as it often tries ta make him fall on top a fires or into the water, or anything that might destroy him. But if yuh can do anything about it, have mercy on us, n' help us."

23 "If you can?!" Josh echoed back. "If you can but believe, all things are possible ta him who believes."

24 As soon as the boy's father heard them words, tears come to his eyes and he cried out, "I believe. I believe! Help me..., w... with my unbelief!"

25 When Josh saw that the crowd was still getting bigger, he rebuked thuh evil spirit, saying to him, "You stupid, strangling spirit, I command yuh, come out a that boy, and never enter him again!"

26 Out of him it came, but only after a deafening scream and one last massive convulsion. Afterwards the boy looked like a corpse. So much so that some was saying, "He's dead." 27 But Josh took him by the hand, gave him a pull and he arose.

28 When everyone was finally back at the house, they asked Josh privately, "Why couldn't we cast out that demon?" 29 He said to 'em, "This kind a evil can only come out by your being immersed in prayer."

30 They left the buot at Bailey Island and took just the van n' a couple a bikes as it was time ta leave Casco Bay. He didn't want anyone ta know where he was either. 31 For he was now teaching his crew in this way, saying to 'em, "The Son a Maine is gonna be delivered into the hands a men and they'll kill him. Once he's dead, he will in three days rise again."

32 But they didn't understand what he was saying, and was afraid ta ask him much a anything about it.