

“Only by Prayer”

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Prayer is not about effort. Prayer is about trust.

Mark 9:14-29

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Fasting or not?

It might surprise you for me to begin by saying that I think the most two significant words in today’s reading appear not in the text but in the footnote. In most Bibles the story ends with Jesus saying, “This kind can come out only by prayer” (29). Most Bibles have a footnote which says something like “Some manuscripts *prayer and fasting*.” Understanding why “and fasting” probably were *not* spoken by Jesus as well as why they were added is critical to understanding Mark 9:14-29.

When Mark originally wrote his gospel, there were no printing presses, mimeograph or facsimile machines, cameras, PDF converters, or high speed desk or office copiers. If someone wanted a copy of what Mark wrote, the process required the painstaking and time-consuming work of copying by hand. Hand-copying will inevitably result in alterations. Sometimes those changes are accidental – a copyist skips a letter or word or line. Occasionally a copyist might actually change something on purpose because he thinks the original can be improved upon.

When ancient manuscripts disagree, how do you know which one is most likely original? In the overwhelming majority of cases, that process is relatively easy and obvious. That’s why we can be quite certain our Bibles are very close to the original documents penned by Paul, John, Mark, and others. The unresolved differences are usually rare and minor. But still, they do come into play in texts such as this one. How do we choose? There are too many factors to name here, but among the factors is that some families of ancient manuscripts are more consistently reliable than others.

To oversimplify, suppose you compared handwritten copies of a 19th century will written in Hickory, NC. One was found in Hickory in the home of the person who wrote the will, clearly on 19th century paper. Four copies of the same will, typed on high quality linen paper, were produced by a third cousin living in Montana who wanted to challenge the will. Which would you assume is authentic? The one that was closest geographically to the origin penned on authentic paper – even though there’s only one.

Back to the words “...and fasting.” The *best* ancient manuscripts omit those two words at the end of the story. The reason there’s any doubt at all about whether Jesus spoke them is that the *majority* of ancient manuscripts include “...and fasting.” In other words, it’s quality vs. quantity. *Most* ancient copyists thought Jesus said, “This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.” More than likely Jesus only said, “...by prayer.”

In order to explain why I think that explanation deserved several minutes at the beginning of my sermon, I’m going to have to retell the whole story.

Believing and struggling

We’re more than halfway through Mark’s gospel. Jesus has been traveling around Galilee and surrounding areas preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons. Most of the time he is accompanied by twelve disciples. Sometimes they are passive – just listening and watching. Other times he employs them as helpers, such as when they distribute food to the masses. He’s even sent them out in pairs to proclaim the kingdom and heal and cast out demons. These missions are successful.

Last week we examined the story where Jesus first elicited a confession from Peter that he was, indeed, the Messiah, and then shocked his disciples by telling them that their Messiah would be killed in Jerusalem. A week later, Jesus disappeared into a high mountain (probably Mt. Hermon, part of a mountain range, often snow-capped, about a mile and a half high on the southern side) with only three of the disciples – Peter, James, and John. Those three were privileged to see his glory shine physically in his body, in an event we call the Transfiguration. As Pastor Paul explained on Ash Wednesday, his glory on the mountain gave meaning to cross.

In our story, the scene shifts to the foot of the same mountain, where the other nine disciples had been left behind. We now learn that, as has happened often before, a large crowd of people has come looking for Jesus. If indeed this scene took place at the base of Mount Hermon, what is unusual is that this is further north than any other public ministry of Jesus that we know about. What is familiar is the mix of people there – disciples of Jesus, teachers of the law (presumably antagonistic), curious onlookers, and at least one man desperate to find a solution for his demonized son.

It had to be disappointing to everyone who came looking for him that Jesus was noticeably absent, along with the three most prominent disciples. Whether you came to argue with him, listen to him, or plead for a healing, it’s a major letdown that he’s not

present. No one was more let down than the man who had brought his epileptic son. The symptoms of this boy, however, were more than physical. The boy also couldn't hear or talk, and this the father attributed, correctly, to a demon.

The disappointed father then asks the nine disciples if, in the absence of Jesus, they can drive out the spirit. We need not presume that the disciples were arrogant about this request, as in, "We got this!" But they have done this before, and presumably they do or say whatever they did before to cast out a demon, and this time it doesn't work.

An argument ensues between the teachers of the law, skeptical anyway about Jesus and his mission, and the disciples of Jesus. I don't think we have to work too hard to guess what the argument is about. The scribes had previously accused Jesus of being in league with Satan. In any case, they are accusatory in this "gotcha" moment, and the disciples are defensive – both of themselves and of Jesus.

As the argument continues, somebody notices Jesus coming from the mountain with three disciples who had been away. As had happened so many times in the Gospels, the people were "overwhelmed with wonder." They run toward Jesus.

The argument must have been so loud that Jesus heard it from a distance. He asks about it. Before scribes or disciples can answer, the desperate father tells Jesus about his son, afflicted with seizures and disabilities and, most of all, an evil spirit.

Jesus surprises us with his response. We'd like him to show some compassion to the father and say something like, "That must have been very frustrating to you. I'm so sorry. And I'm glad I am here." Instead, Jesus issues a rebuke: "O unbelieving generation! How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" To whom does he say this? The scribes? The disciples? The crowd? All of them? We're not told. But having just come off the mountain he's clearly wanting to see more faith than he is encountering at this moment.

Then Jesus adds, "Bring the boy to me." I suppose this means that in the rush to approach Jesus, even the father had left the boy behind so he could be at the front of the crowd. People bring the boy to Jesus, and the evil spirit, undoubtedly knowing he is about to lose his terror grip on this child and family, flings the boy into a convulsion.

"How long has he been like this?" Jesus asks. I'm quite sure Jesus knows, and the father knows, so this question must be for the benefit of the others.

"From childhood." This sounds to me like the boy is a teenager, and this started when he was a preschooler. The father adds some more detail – that the spirit has often thrown the boy into fire or water to try to kill him. My suspicion is that the evil spirit was targeting the father (and presumably mother and anyone else) as much as the boy. They must not have slept well for years with the terror that their boy would be

dead when they woke up. This is one desperate, pleading father. The father breaks down and pleads with tears and passion and desperation, “But if you can do anything, please take pity and help us.”

We almost expect Jesus to throw up his hands in exasperation and say, “There it is again. If you can, huh? Unbelieving generation! Yet another example! I’m done.” Instead, he says, “If you can? Everything is possible for the one who believes.”

The father then adds one of the most memorable lines in the Gospels. I love this line: “I do believe; help my unbelief.” There’s an urgency in the word “help.” It’s not just “assist,” as in, “Help me bring in the groceries.” It’s more like a drowning man rising one last time from under water and screaming, “HELP!” as in, “If you don’t come right now and rescue me, what little faith I have will not survive.”

More people rush the scene. Whether the previous crowd was still gathering or whether the word had now gotten out that Jesus actually showed up, we’re not told. It is apparently in response to this rapidly approaching mob that Jesus speaks to the spirit: “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

With one more scream and a violent convulsion, the spirit leaves. The boy is lifeless. “He’s dead,” the crowd gasps. Jesus grabs the boy’s hand, and he stands up, another one of his two-stage miracles. Stage one: demon cast. Stage two: raised to life. It seems to be a preview of Jesus’ own death and resurrection. If the story had ended there, we would assume, as many do even though it doesn’t end there, that the story is about having faith, or enough faith, or the right kind of faith. It isn’t.

Only by prayer

In vv. 28-29 we find an epilogue to the story. It’s important. No, it’s critical. You can’t interpret this story correctly without the last two verses. The explanation comes out of the hearing and sight of the crowd, the scribes, the father and his healed boy. This is a moment for Jesus and the disciples to debrief.

The nine initiate the brief dialogue: “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” Jesus answers, “This kind can only come out by prayer.”

This is how Mark wants us to remember this story. The important take-home is the priority of prayer. This Lenten season, I want us to focus on prayer. I want me to focus on prayer.

Why don’t we pray? Let me suggest three reasons.

First, we don’t pray because we substitute other coping mechanisms. These include chemicals and addictions – shopping, alcohol, social media, food, sex and pornography, exercise, gossip, and so much more. Whatever you’re substituting for

prayer, give it up for Lent. (The only caution is that you get a pass on Lenten disciplines on Sundays, so if you give up gossip or porn, don't relax the rule on Sunday!)

Second, we don't pray because we don't know what to say. This is true for novices in prayer as well as seasoned saints. Maybe prayer is so new you really have no idea how to start. Or, if you've been praying for a long time, maybe the words you have used have been routine.

I needed a fresh approach to prayer for Lent for myself. On Tuesday, I received an email from a mentor, suggesting to pastors that we think simply about prayer. Prayer, Tim Laniak said, boils down to two words: *gratitude* and *trust*. On Ash Wednesday I paraphrased Dr. Laniak's approach to prayer as minding your manners before God: *thank you* and *please*. If you need a simple way to think of prayer, there you have it. If you are ready for a deep dive, head to our church library. Our librarians have identified a number of excellent resources on prayer and other spiritual disciplines.

Another help to me this year has been a book given to me by Greg and Abigail Hardy, titled, *Every Moment Holy*, by Douglas McElvey. McElvey has written liturgies and prayers for so many common moments. Again, whether novice or seasoned saint, this book allows you to borrow the words of others to articulate your prayers. For example, here's an excerpt from "A Liturgy for First Waking" –

I am not the captain of my own destiny,
nor even of this new day, and so
I renounce anew all claim
to my own life and desires.
I am only yours, O Lord.
Lead me by your mercies through these hours,
that I might spend them well,
Not in harried pursuit of my own agendas,
but rather in good service to you.

If you don't like "manmade liturgies," then turn to the book of Psalms and be inspired by how the psalmists pray. I was inspired enough by McElvey to choose a discipline of writing a different "thank you" and "please" prayer each day for Lent. For example, Thursday night was a tough night for sleep because of post-op physical therapy. So I wrote a "Thank you for Sleep" prayer the next day. Sometimes the loss of something makes us more grateful for it. I also wrote a "Prayer for Those with Chronic Pain," because I realize my pain is only temporary.

Third, we don't pray because we misunderstand prayer. This brings us back to Mark 14:29. Jesus said, "This kind can only come out by prayer." Early on, one copyist or maybe many, added in the words, "...and fasting." The addition became the view of the majority then and now. Why? Because we want to believe that what we do is why God does what he does. We want to believe that it's our prayer that works the magic. Because we never seem to believe that prayer is enough. We need to add effort.

The heresy about prayer, even among the very sincere and committed followers of Jesus – then and now, here and there – is that prayer is what we do to get God to do. The more we pray, the harder we pray, the more passionate we pray, the more self-denial accompanies our prayer (as in, through fasting), the more people we get praying with us, the longer we pray, especially if we can get lots of people praying 24-7, the more we show God we really mean what we’re praying and then he’ll have to come through. If God’s going to prove himself worthy of our faith, then he’ll have to do what we pray if we really pray and even fast. Jesus says prayer is enough.

When Jesus says “This kind...only by prayer,” he’s referring specifically to the kind of things we encounter that force us to come to grips with the inadequacy of our effort, even if it’s a religious effort. God will allow us to deal with a lot of life thinking there is a cause-and-effect between our efforts and good things that happen. Once in a while in grace he will let us encounter “this kind.” You’ll raise two perfect kids and then get a hellion. You’ll hum along in your job for years and then the economy tanks. You’ll think your retirement planning is secure because you’ve planned so well, and then coronavirus comes along.

“OK,” you say, “But what Jesus actually said was “Everything is possible for the one who believes.” Isn’t that about our prayers being answered if we believe enough?

And I want to say (but I’m not Jesus), “How long will I put up with you?” You don’t really believe, do you, that Jesus means if you believe you can have that Ferrari you want or get automatically healed without cancer or teleport yourself to Jupiter. “Everything I want is possible with enough faith”? No, of course not.

My favorite quote from this week’s study is this: “Prayer is unanswered only if we have dictated the answer in advance.” (Pheme Perkins) The father in Mark 9 did not dictate the answer to his prayer. He prayed for “help.” He doesn’t need you to give him information about what happened or what needs to happen. He needs you ask for help.

Fortunately, God doesn’t judge us by our ability to articulate exactly the right words. He’s not sitting up in heaven thinking, “If you’d say it right, I’d come through.” He is saying, “Come to me and ask for help, and I’ll make sure you see with your own eyes that no evil force in this world or in the unseen world is a match for me.”

Prayer is not about effort; it’s about trust. Prayer is not about cornering God; it’s about asking God. Prayer is not about demanding of God; it’s about releasing to God. Prayer is about believing. It’s about trusting. It’s about being with God and knowing whatever he does is good because he is good. Prayer is about growing in the instinct to let every beautiful happening be a reason to say “Thank you,” and every need a reason to say, “Please.” Prayer is about growing in the ability to admit, “I believe; help my unbelief.” This Lenten season, pray more. Not because it “works,” but because God is good and everything is possible with him. Amen.