



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 16

September 12, 2021

Spirit-Given Faith

Mark 9:14-29

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.”

In the account just prior to today’s Gospel, Jesus took Peter, James, and John, up a high mountain and was transfigured before them, His clothes becoming radiant, “intensely white,” the text says, “as no one on earth could bleach them” (v. 3). That event is known to us as the Transfiguration which we commemorate at the end of the Epiphany season, just before the start of Lent. So, at the beginning of today’s reading, Jesus, Peter, James, and John, were on their way back from the Transfiguration. The other nine disciples were at the foot of the mountain waiting for them. And while they were waiting, a father brought his son to see Jesus. The son was tormented by an evil spirit and the father was hoping Jesus would remove it.

The disciples should have been able to do this because Jesus had already given them the authority to do so. Nevertheless, they were unable to help.



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 16

September 12, 2021

And they weren't the only ones waiting there for Jesus. Some of the scribes were there, too, looking for an opportunity to criticize Him and discredit Him. So, when the disciples had failed to drive the demon out of the boy, a few of those critics began to debate with them about what they were doing wrong. This attracted the attention of bystanders. By the time Jesus arrived with Peter, James, and John, they saw a great crowd gathered around the others, and the scribes arguing with them (v. 14).

Jesus asked them what the problem was and the father came forward and said, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 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" (v. 17-18).

Jesus then expressed His disappointment with the disciples in rather strong terms. He said, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me" (v. 19). And therein lies one of our great talents as human beings, one of our claims to fame – that we can exasperate even God! Jesus was frustrated with His disciples' lack of faith.

When they brought the boy to Jesus, the demon's response reminds us that the devil and his minions know who Jesus is. For, when the evil spirit saw him, it immediately convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth (v. 20). It's just as the Apostle James wrote: "The demons believe—and shudder!" (Jam. 2:19) The evil spirit was terrified of Jesus. You also see here the difference between knowledge and faith. Satan's forces know that Jesus is the Son of God, but it's clear they have no faith in Him for salvation.

The father of this boy had faith, but it was a faith of desperation. It's as though he were thinking, "I've tried everything else and I've got nothing to lose by trying Jesus." What he said was, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (v. 22). He had enough faith to bring his boy to Jesus, but he wasn't sure if Jesus could actually help.

Jesus' rebuke of this father is gentler than His rebuke of the disciples, but it's still a rebuke. He said to him, "If you can't! All things are possible for one who believes" (v. 23).

This lack of faith – on the part of the disciples and the father – represents two possibilities for a faith that misses the mark: The disciples had faith in their past *success*; the father had faith in his past *failures*. Either way, their focus was on themselves and their experience rather than on Christ.

At one time, the disciples had been able to drive out demons, but now they couldn't. Like many people who have success, they'd come to believe that their success was the result of their own skill and ability. They'd begun to rely on their own power instead of the true Source of power: God. Like many who experience God's blessings, they began to focus more on the blessings than on the Giver of those blessings.

The father had faith in a different kind of experience. No one had been able to heal his son. He'd put his faith in many earthly entities and had been disappointed every time. And when he asked Jesus for help, he recalled every disappointment he had suffered. He said, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." There was no confidence



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 16

September 12, 2021

in his request. He was trusting in his past experience. Everything he'd tried had failed. He fully expected to be disappointed again.

The faith struggles the disciples and this father were having demonstrate the war that the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh constantly wage against us. One of their strategies is to convince us that we are responsible for our own faith.

I'll say it plainly: No unregenerate person has within him the capacity to make a decision for Jesus. And thinking that we do, and that our salvation in some way depends on us, produces one of two possible reactions: self-deception or despair. Despair comes from asking: "Is my faith strong enough;" "Am I really sincere;" "Did I really mean it when I committed my life to Christ;" and so on. And then it looks inward for the answer to those questions. Of course, this leads to despair, because there's no way to guarantee a positive answer. On the other hand, self-deception answers those questions positively despite all the evidence to the contrary.

The truth is that if our faith really did depend on us, we would never have it. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). What can a dead man do but rot? He certainly can't gin up any kind of faith. Paul also wrote that "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it *cannot*" (Rom. 8:7). So, not only is it impossible for us to produce our own faith, we don't *want* to, for without faith we're hostile toward God.

The only real solution is for the Holy Spirit to put our old sinful nature to death. When Jesus drove the unclean spirit out of the boy in our text He said, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." 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." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose (vs. 25-27). The corpse-like appearance of the boy reminds us that the Old Adam in us must die with all sins and evil desires. Then, just as Jesus took the boy by the hand and raised him up, so the Holy Spirit must bring forth a new man in us.

The faith that the Holy Spirit brings to life in us is a faith not in ourselves or in our experience, but a faith in Jesus – the same Jesus who drove the demon out of the boy in today's Gospel. Just as Jesus was the only solution for the demon-possessed son, so also is He the only solution for us. And, as Jesus dealt with the demon in today's Gospel, He deals with the sin in us. He didn't tell the boy to cure himself. And He doesn't tell us to work off our own sin. Instead, He took our sins upon Himself and carried them to the cross. He took the punishment our sins deserved so that we don't have to suffer for them. He conquered sin with His suffering and death and then conquered death by rising from the grave. Now He offers the cure for sin to all mankind. This Jesus is the object of the faith that the Holy Spirit gives us as He drowns the Old Adam and brings the new man to life.

Which brings us back to that father's prayer: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (v. 24) When Christians pray this prayer, we acknowledge that our faith is weak and we can do nothing on our own to maintain it, let alone strengthen it. We're crying out to God from our utter



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 16

September 12, 2021

helplessness and begging Him to keep us in the one, true faith until He comes to take us home to Himself in heaven.

The Holy Spirit works to give us a faith that believes in God's grace, not in our own works. He calls us to believe in the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He calls us to believe in the One who drives out demons and gives us Himself in their place. He calls us to believe in Jesus Christ. The faith that comes from within us will fail. The faith that comes from this world will fail. Only the Holy Spirit's gift of faith in Jesus will last. And only through that faith will Jesus give us forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen