

Jesus is presented with the case of a young man possessed by an evil spirit whom the disciples have been unable to help despite having been given the authority to cast out evil spirits. When Jesus pointed out the lack of faith at work in the situation, the father of the young man recognized his own doubts and asked Jesus to help him overcome his own unbelief.

Verses 1-16: Jesus takes Peter, James and John up to a secluded place on a high mountain and is transfigured in front of them. Elijah and Moses appear as well and talk with Jesus. Peter, not knowing what to say, says that they ought to build tabernacles for Jesus, Elijah and Moses, but he is interrupted by the voice of God speaking from a cloud that enveloped them, saying “This is my beloved Son, hear Him.” Suddenly things were back to normal and as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them to tell no one what they had seen until after His resurrection. Having just seen Elijah, the disciples ask why the scribes taught that the coming of Elijah would precede the coming of the Messiah. Jesus answered that it was true that Elijah was prophesied to come first but it was also true that he had already arrived and had been rejected (referring to John the Baptist – Matt. 17:12-13). When Jesus, Peter, James and John arrive at the bottom of mountain, they find the rest of the disciples in the midst of a discussion with some scribes, surrounded by a multitude of people. When the multitude see Jesus they immediately begin running to Him to greet Him. Jesus asks the scribes what they had been discussing with the disciples.

17 And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; 18 And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not.

“And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit” – The man who was apparently the center of the discussion steps forward and says that he has brought his son to Jesus. The son has been oppressed by an evil spirit that was preventing him from speaking.

“And wheresoever he taketh [sieves] him, he teareth [throw down in convulsions] him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away [to dry up or wither]” – Apparently this son’s behavior would be relatively normal except for occasions when without warning the demonic spirit would send the young man into violent convulsions that threw him to the ground and caused him to foam at the mouth, grind his teeth and after which his body would become stiff and unmoving as if it was dried up and withered. The young man was obviously not in control of his body when this happened because it often caused him to fall into water or fire where he could suffer serious injury (v. 22). Some commentators believe that the boy had epilepsy, but the fact that Jesus “rebuked the foul spirit” (v. 25) indicates that a demonic spirit was the root cause of his symptoms. However, this does not necessarily mean that people with epilepsy are demon possessed, but simply that demonic possession in this case produced symptoms similar to epilepsy.

“and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not” – The father had brought his son for Jesus to cast out the evil spirit but since Jesus was not with them at the time (He was on the mountain being transfigured) he appealed to the disciples for help. Jesus had given the disciples the authority to both cast out spirits and heal the sick (Mark 6:7) but they had been unable to help this young man.

19 He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto me.

Matthew and Luke give us a more complete version of what Jesus said: “O faithless and perverse generation” (Matt. 17:17; Luke 9:41). Jesus seems to be frustrated at multiple levels. The Greek word for “generation” can not only refer to a span of time but also to a family line, so it seems that Jesus was frustrated with the lack of faith being exhibited that was symptomatic of the family line of the Jewish nation as a whole. This fact showed that they were “perverse” (the Greek word means “to turn away from the right path”) by not having faith in Him. He likely was also expressing frustration with the scribes who were probably gloating at the fact that the disciples had not been able to cast out the evil spirit (v. 14). Finally, Jesus may have been frustrated with the disciples who apparently did not have enough faith to cast out the evil spirit. Despite the frustration, Jesus compassionately has the father bring his son to Him.

20 And they brought him unto him: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming.

The boy was brought to Jesus but as soon as he saw Jesus, the demonic spirit immediately sent him into violent convulsions. The demonic spirit most certainly recognized who Jesus was, as did other demonic spirits that He cast out (**Luke 4:41** “*And devils also came out of many, crying out, and saying, Thou art Christ the Son of God. And he rebuking them suffered them not to speak: for they knew that he was Christ.*” **Mark 1:34** “*And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils; and suffered not the devils to speak, because they knew him*”). It may be possible that when the demonic spirit saw Jesus, knowing that his time was short, “dug in his heels” in a futile effort to strengthen his hold on the boy and resist the authority of Jesus, the Son of God.

21 And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child.

“And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child” – Mark gives us a more detailed account of Jesus’ interaction with the boy’s father than the other gospel accounts. Jesus shows compassionate interest in the extent of the young man’s suffering by asking how long he had been tormented by this demonic spirit. The father replies that it started when his son was a young child, which implies that his son was now an adult or nearly so. If this is true, then this young man had apparently been afflicted by the evil spirit for several years.

22 And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us.

“And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him” – The father adds further details to demonstrate the extent of his son’s suffering: the convulsions would often cause him to fall into fires (to get burned) or into water (to be drowned). The father saw these events as the evil spirit’s attempts to harm or even kill the young man.

“but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us” – Since the disciples had not been able to cast out the evil spirit, this father is unsure if even Jesus Himself can help. He pleads with Jesus to “do what He can.” His plea that Jesus “have compassion on us” implies that this father may also have been afraid that even if Jesus could help, He still might not be willing. He is apparently unsure of both Jesus’ ability and willingness to help.

23 Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. 24 And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.

“Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe” – Jesus’ statement seems to be in direct response to the father’s “if thou canst do anything” plea for help. Any hindrance to helping the boy would not be on the part of Jesus’ ability to do it. Instead, rescuing the boy from the oppression of the evil spirit depended on the father’s ability to believe that Jesus could do it.

“all things are possible to him that believeth” – Faith is a powerful thing and can determine whether or not God will act in our behalf. However, we must not put our faith in our faith; faith depends on Who we put our faith in. Faith pleases God, prompting Him to respond. Unbelief gives God no reason to act in our behalf.

Matt. 13:58 (Jesus, returning to Nazareth) *“And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.”*

Mark 11:23 *“For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith.”*

1 John 5:14-15 *“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.”*

Heb. 11:6 *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”*

“And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” – The father desperately wanted his son to be delivered from this evil spirit but he recognized the weakness of his own faith. He believed that Jesus could help his son enough that he brought him to Jesus, but he knew that there were elements of doubt in his heart. This doubt is true of all of us because we are all fallen sinful creatures. This father did what we all should do and asked Jesus to strengthen his faith.

25 When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, *Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him.*

Jesus saw that a crowd was gathering so He decided to help the son before the crowd got any bigger, possibly to avoid further publicity. He commanded the foul spirit to leave the young man and never come back.

26 And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. 27 But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose.

Apparently this evil spirit was not happy to be forced to leave because it sent the boy into what may have been the most severe convulsions the boy had experienced, crying out as it went. Once it was gone, the boy was likely exhausted from the experience and appeared to be laying lifeless. Some of the onlookers concluded that the boy must have died, but Jesus took the boy by the hand to help him to stand.

28 And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? 29 And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.

“And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out?” – Once they were alone with Jesus in the privacy of the house, the disciples wanted to know why they had been unable to cast the evil spirit out of the boy. Jesus had given them the authority to do so and they had been successful in casting out spirits when He sent them out two-by-two. They could not understand why they had failed this time.

“And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting” – Mark omits what Jesus said about the role of unbelief in the disciple’s failure, but Matthew records it: **Matt. 17:19-21** *“Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”* Jesus adds an additional reason for their failure: the need for prayer and fasting in this case. Prayer and fasting demonstrate our dependence on God. It may be that the disciples had trusted the authority that had been given to them to cast out spirits rather than on the One Who gave it to them. Likely this is why Jesus had told them not to rejoice because the spirits were subject to them but because their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:20).