

UNBELIEVING BELIEF



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Mark 9:24, "And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

We owe to Mark's Gospel the fullest account of the pathetic condition of the healing of the demoniac boy. Mark alone gives us this part of the conversation between our Lord and the afflicted boy's father. This father had brought his child to the disciples and found them unable to help him or do anything with his son. A torrent appeal breaks from this poor father's lips as soon as the Lord gives him an opportunity of speaking. He dwells upon all the piteous details with that fondness for repetition which only sorrow knows so well and likes to dwell.

Jesus Christ gives him back his doubts. The father said, "If Thou canst do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Christ's answer according to the true reading, is not as it stands in our authorized version. Literally, "If Thou canst." "All things are possible to the one believing." throwing as it were, the responsibility on the man. But it is a quotation of this father's own words. He said to Christ, "If Thou canst." and Christ said unto him, "If thou canst."

If Thou canst, as if he waved it aside with superb recognition of its utter unfitness to the present case. Say not, if Thou canst. That is certain. But all things are possible to you, not to do, but to get, if, which is only if, in the case thou believest.

"I can," says Christ, and if thy faith lays hold on My omnipotence, all is done. That majestic Word is like a blow of steel upon flint. It strikes a little spark of faith which lights up the soul and turns the smoky pillar of doubt into a clear flame of confidence.

"Lord, I believe. Help Thou mine unbelief." We have here the birth, the infancy, the cry and the education of faith.

First notice the birth of faith. There are many ways to the temple, and it matters little by which of them a man travels, if so he gets

there. There is no so-called royal road to Christian faith which saves the soul. And yet though identity of experience is not to be expected, men are like each other in the depths, and only unlike on the surface, of their being. Therefore man's one experience carefully analyzed is very apt to give, at least the rudiments of the experience of all others who have been in similar circumstances.

So I think we see here, without insisting on any pedantic repetition of the same details in every case, in broad outline, a sketch map of the road, there are three elements here: Eager desire, the sense of utter helplessness, and the acceptance of Christ's calm assurance. Look at these three.

This man knows what he wanted, and he wanted it very badly. Whatever has any intensity and reality of desire for the great gifts which Jesus Christ comes to bestow, has taken at least one step on the way to faith.

Conversely, the hindrances which block the path of a great many of us are simply that we do not care to possess the blessings which Jesus Christ in His Gospel offers. I am talking about the so-called intellectual hindrances to belief. Though I think that a great many of these, if carefully examined, would be found. In the ultimate analysis, to repose upon this same stolid indifference to the blessings which Christianity offers. But for the large number of us, the real reason why they have not trusted in Jesus Christ is because they do not care to possess the blessing which Jesus Christ brings.

Do you desire to have your sins forgiven? Has purity any attraction to you? Do you care at all about the calm and pure blessings of communion with God? Would you like to live always in the light of His face? Do you want to be masters of your lusts and passions?

I am not saying "Do you want to go to Heaven, or to escape hell, when you die?" But I ask, "Has the future in any of its as-

pects any such power over you as that it stirs you to any earnestness and persistency of desire. Or is it all shadowy and vain, and ineffectual and dim?" What we Christian teachers have to fight against is that we are charged to offer a man a blessing that they do not want, and have to create a demand before there can be any acceptance of the supply. "Give us the leeks and the garlicks of Egypt," said the Hebrews in the wilderness... "our soul loatheth this light bread."

So it is with many of us. We do not want God, goodness, quietness of conscience, purity of life, self-consecration to a lofty ideal, one thousandth part as much as we want success in our daily occupations. Or some one or other of the delights that the world gives.

Luther, in his rough way, has a story, in something he called "table talk" about a herd of swine to whom their keeper offered some rich dainties, and the pigs said, "give us grains." That is what so many men do when Jesus Christ comes with His gifts and His blessings. They turn away, but if they were offered some poor earthly good, all their desires would go out towards it, and their eager hands would be scrambling who should first possess it. If we saw things as they are, and our needs as they are, nothing would kindle such intensity of longing in our hearts as that rejected or neglected promise of life eternal and Divine which Jesus Christ brings. If we could only awaken in some indifferent heart this longing, that heart would have taken at least the initial step to a life of Christian godliness.

Further, we have here another element of a sense of utter helplessness. How often had this poor father looked at his boy in the grip of the fiend and has not wrung his hands in despair that he could not do anything for him to help his son? This same impotence, absolute, is one which we all, if we rightly understand what we need, must cherish. Can you forgive your own sins? Can you cleanse your own nature? Can you make yourselves other than you are by any effort of volition? Or by any painfulness of discipline?

To a certain small extent you can. In regard to superficial culture and eradication, your careful husbandry of your own wills may do much, but you cannot deal with your deepest needs. If we understand what is required in order to bring one soul into harmony and fellowship with God, we shall recognize that we ourselves can do nothing to save, and little to help ourselves.

"Every man his own redeemer." Which is the motto of some people today. And this may do very well for fine weather and for superficial experience, but when the storm comes it proves a poor refuge, like the pavilions that they put up for festivals, which are all right while the sun is shining and the flags are fluttering, but are wretched shelters when the rain beats and the wind howls.

We can do nothing for ourselves. The recognition of our own helplessness is the obverse, so to speak, and underside, of confidence in the Divine help. The coin, as it were, has its two faces. On the one is written, "Trust in the Lord." On the other is written, "Nothing in myself. In God we trust, and nothing in myself."

A drowning man, if he tries to help himself, only encumbers his would-be rescuer, and may drown him, too. The truest hold he can give is to let the strong arm that has cleft the waters for his sake fling itself around him and bear him safe to land.

So eager desire after offered blessings and consciousness of my own impotence to secure them, these are the initial steps of faith.

And the last of the elements here is, listening to the calm assurance of Jesus Christ. "If Thou canst." Do not say that to me, I can, and because I can, all things are possible for thee to receive.

In like manner He stands at the door of each of our hearts and speaks in each of our needs, and says, "I can satisfy it." **Rest for your soul, cleansing for your sins, satisfaction for your duties, patience in your sufferings, all these will come to you, if you lay hold of my hand.** His assurance helps trembling confidence to be born. And out of doubt the great calm of the Lord smites the

fire of trust. And if we will listen to Him, we shall surely find in Him all that we need.

Think how marvelous it is that this Jewish Peasant should plant Himself in the front of humanity, over against the burdened, sinful race of men, and pledge Himself to forgive and to cleanse their sins, to bear all their sicknesses, to be their strength in weakness, their comfort in sorrow, the rest of their hearts, their Heaven upon Earth, their life in death, their glory in Heaven, and their all in all, and not only should pledge Himself, but in the blessed assurance of millions should have more than fulfilled all that He promised.

“They trusted in Him, and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed.” Will you not answer His sovereign Word of promise with your own, “Lord, I believe.”

Secondly, we have here the infancy of faith. As soon as the consciousness of belief dawned upon this father, and the effort to exercise it was put forth, there sprang up the consciousness of its imperfection. He would not have known that he did not believe unless he had tried to believe. So it is in all excellence, and the effort to put it forth is the surest way of discovering how little of it we have.

On the other side, sorrow for the lack of some form of goodness is itself a proof of partial possession, in some rudimentary and incipient form of that goodness. The utterly lazy man never mourns over his idleness. It is only the one would fain work harder than he does. And already works tolerably hard, who does so. So the little spark of faith in this man’s heart, like a taper in a cavern, showed the abyss of darkness that lay unilluminated round about it.

Thus, then, in its infancy, faith may and does coexist with much unfaith and doubt. The same state of mind, looked at from its two opposite ends, as it were, may be designated faith or unbelief. Just as a piece of silk, according to the angle at which you hold it, may show you only the bright colors of its warp or the dark ones of its weft.

When you are travelling in a railway train with the sun streaming in at the windows, if you look out on the hand of you will see the illumined face of every tree and blade of grass and house, and if you look out the other, you will see their shadowed side. And so the same landscape may seem to be all lit up by the sunshine of belief, or to be darkened by the gloom of distrust. If we consider how great and how perfect ought to be our confidence, to bear any due proportion to the firmness of that upon which it is built, we shall not be slow to believe that through life there will always be the presence in us, more or less, of these two elements.

There will be all degrees of progress, between two extremes of infantile and mature faith. And there follows from that thought this practical lesson. That the discovery of such unbelief should never make a man doubt the reality or genuineness of his little faith. We are all apt to needlessly bitter things against ourselves when we get a glimpse of the incompleteness of our Christian life and character. But there is no reason why a man should fancy that he is a hypocrite because he finds out that he is not a perfect believer.

But on the other hand, let us remember that the same thing is not the maturity, but the progressive character of faith. It was most natural that this father in our text, at the very first moment when he began to put his confidence in Jesus Christ as able to heal his child, should be aware of much tremulousness mingling with it. But it is not most unusual that there should be the same relative proportion of faith and unbelief in the heart and experience of men who have long professed to be Christians?

You don’t expect the infant to have adult limbs. But you do expect him to grow. True faith at its beginning may be like a grain of mustard seed, but if the grain of mustard seed be alive it will grow to a great tree where all the fowls of the air can lodge in the branches. It is a crying shame and a sin that in all Christian communities there should be so many grey-headed babies, men who have been for years and years been professing to

be Christ's followers. And whose faith is but little, if at all, not stronger, but maybe even weaker than it was in the first days of their profession.

You have need of mild and not of strong meat, could be the commentary on many Christians. And consequently the vitality of their faith is made suspicious, not because it is feeble, but because it is not growing stronger.

Thirdly, notice the cry of infant faith. "Help Thou mine unbelief." This may have either of two meanings. The man's desire was either that his faith should be increased and his unbelief, helped, by being removed by Christ's operation upon his spirit, or that Christ would, help him and his boy by healing the child, though the faith which asked the blessing was so feeble that it might be called unbelief.

There is nothing in the language or in the text to determine which of these two meanings is intended. We must settle it by our own sense of what would be most likely under the circumstances. To me it seems extremely improbable that, when the fathers whole soul was absorbed in the healing of his son, he should turn aside to ask for the inward and spiritual process of having his faith strengthened, rather he said, "Heal my child, though it is unbelief as much as faith that asks Thee to do it."

The lesson is that even when we are conscious of much tremulousness in our faith, we have a right to ask and expect that it shall be answered. Weak faith is faith. The tremulous hand does touch. The cord may be as slender as a spider's web that binds a heart to Jesus Christ, but it does bind. In the Object is the merit.

The poor woman in the other miracle who put out her wasted finger tip, coming behind Him in the crowd, and stealthily touching the hem of His garment. Though it was only the end of her finger nail that was laid on the robe, carried away with her His blessing. And so the feeblest faith joins the soul, in the measure of its strength, to Jesus Christ.

But let us remember that while thus the cry of infant faith is heard, the stronger voice of stronger faith is more abundantly heard. Jesus Christ once for all laid down the law when He said, to one of the suppliants at His feet, "according to your faith be it unto you."

The measure of our belief is the measure of our blessing. The wider you open the door, the more angels will crowd into it, with their white wings and their calm faces. The bore of the pipe determines the amount of water that flows into the cistern.

Every man gets in measure in which he desires. Though a tremulous hand may hold out a cup into which Jesus Christ will not refuse to pour the wine of the kingdom, yet the tremulous hand will spill much of the blessing, and he that would have the full enjoyment of the mercies promised, and possible, must ask in faith, nothing wavering.

The sensitive paper which records the hours of sunshine in day has great gaps upon its lines of light answering to the times when clouds have obscured the sun. And the communication of blessings from God is intermittent, if there be intermittency of faith. If you desire an unbroken line of mercy, joy and peace, keep up an unbroken continuity of trustful confidence.

Fourthly, we have here the education of faith. The birth, the infancy, the cry and the education of a child-like faith.

Christ paid no heed in words to the man's confession of unbelief, but proceeded to do the work which answered his prayer in both its possible meanings. He responded to imperfect confidence by His perfect work of cure, and by that perfect work of cure, He strengthened the imperfect confidence which it has answered.

Thus He educates by His answers, His over-answers to our poor desires. And the abundance of His gifts rebukes the poverty of our petitions more emphatically than any words of remonstrance beforehand could have done. He does not lecture us into faith, but He blesses us into it.

When the apostle was sinking in the flood, Jesus Christ said no word of reproach until He had grasped him, with His strong hand and held him safe. And then, when the sustaining touch thrilled through his frame, then and not till then, He said with a smile on His face, that the moonlight showed as knowing how unanswerable his question was, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"

That is how He will deal with us if we will, over-answering our tremulous petitions. And so teaching us to hope more abundantly that, we "shall praise Him more and more." The disappointments, the weaknesses, the shameful defeats which come when our confidence fails, are another page of His lesson book.

The same apostle of whom I have been speaking got that lesson when standing on the billows, and instead of looking at Christ, looking at their wrath and foam, his heart failed him, and because his heart failed him, he began to sink. If we turn away from Jesus Christ, and interrupt the continuity of our faith by calculating the height of the breakers, and the weight of the water that is in them, and what will become of us when they topple over with their white crests upon our

heads, then gravity will begin to work, and we shall begin to sink. And well for us if we have sunk as far as our knees. We look back again to the Lord and say, "Lord save me. I perish."

The weakness is our own when faith sleeps. And the rejoicing power which is ours because it is His when faith awakes are God's education of it to fuller and ampler degrees and depth. We shall lose the meaning of life, and the best lesson that joy and sorrow, calm and storm, victory and defeat, can give us, unless all these make us rooted and grounded in faith.

Do we desire our truest good? Do we know that we cannot win it, fight for it to gain it, or do anything to obtain it in our own strength? Have you ever heard Jesus Christ saying to you, "Come, and I will give you rest." Don't turn away from Him, but like this agonized father in our story, fall at His feet with "Lord I believe. Help Thou mine unbelief." and He will confirm your feeble faith by His rich response.

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