

MARK 9:14–27. (EHV)

When they returned to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some experts in the law were arguing with them. As soon as all the people in the crowd saw Jesus, they were very excited and ran to greet him. He asked them, **“What are you arguing about with them?”** One man from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who has a spirit that makes him unable to speak. Wherever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.” **“O unbelieving generation,”** Jesus replied. **“How long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me.”** They brought the boy to Jesus. As soon as the spirit saw him, it threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy’s father, **“How long has this been happening to him?”** “From childhood,” he said. “It has often thrown him into the fire and into the water to kill him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” **“If you can?”** Jesus said to him. **“All things are possible for the one who believes.”** The child’s father immediately cried out and said with tears, “I do believe. Help me with my unbelief!” When Jesus saw that a crowd was quickly gathering, he rebuked the unclean spirit. **“You mute and deaf spirit,”** he said, **“I command you to come out of him and never enter him again!”** The spirit screamed, shook the boy violently, and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many of them said, “He’s dead!” But Jesus took him by the hand, raised him up, and he stood up.

Martin Luther once famously described each Christian as being *simul justus et peccator*. That’s a Latin phrase that means “simultaneously a righteous person and a sinner.” That is, we are righteous in God’s eyes through faith in Jesus Christ, but in our day-to-day lives on earth we still struggle against our sinful flesh and commit many sins every day.

In the account before us, we see the same truth, but in a little different clothing. If we want to follow Luther’s example and use Latin, we could call what we see on display here *simul fidelis et infidelis*, “simultaneously a believer and an unbeliever.”

1. Fidelis

Jesus and three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, have just come down from the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. They return to the other disciples and find them in the middle of a large crowd and commotion. Some experts in the law are arguing with the disciples. When Jesus, like a parent or referee, asks the crowd what they are arguing about, one man from the crowd steps forward.

This man is clearly a believer. He has a son who has been possessed by an evil spirit since he was a child. The spirit has made him unable to speak, has seized him, thrown him down, caused him to foam at the mouth, grind his teeth, and become rigid. Incidentally, this doesn’t mean that all people who have these same symptoms are necessarily demon-possessed. Though we did consider last week how demons do play a role in much of our misery, including many of our ailments, illnesses, and diseases, there is still a big difference between a demon causing you to be a ill, and a demon physically possessing you, as this demon was doing to this boy. Yet in spite of such a horrible and seemingly hopeless condition, this man brought his son to Jesus to

have his son's evil spirit driven out. "Teacher, I brought you my son," he says. The man trusts that Jesus is stronger than this spirit, in spite of all the demonstrations of power the spirit has shown. He is a believer.

The man also seems to understand the concept of the public ministry, the fact that Jesus can delegate and has delegated his power and authority to his disciples. The man later explains that he didn't bring his son to Jesus, strictly speaking. "I asked your disciples to drive it out," he says. And yet even though he asked the disciples, not Jesus, he still tells Jesus, "Teacher, I brought you my son." To bring someone to those whom Jesus has called and to whom he has delegated his power and authority is to bring that person to Jesus himself. The man understands and believes that.

And actually, what he literally says in Greek is, "I *told* your disciples to drive it out." I don't think the man was being disrespectful. We tell God what to do in the Lord's Prayer, and we are not being disrespectful, because he first told us to pray for those things and promises to give them to his believers. In the same way, this man told Jesus's disciples to drive out the evil spirit because he not only trusted in Jesus's power over the devil and over evil, but also trusted that Jesus wants to free people from the power of the devil. He was a believer.

We also see that this man is a believer from his prayer to Jesus: "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." We'll talk about the "if you can" part in a bit, but for now, let's give this man credit for understanding and confessing that whatever help he and his son might receive from Jesus would not be earned or deserved. He asks Jesus not to reward him for the good things he has done. He asks Jesus to have compassion on him and his son; he puts himself on the same level as his demon-possessed son as someone equally in need of Jesus's compassion and help. He is basically confessing, "We are both miserable wretches, Jesus. Take pity on us." That's the confession of a believer.

Finally, the man tell us explicitly he is a believer: "I do believe," he says. We can see that he is a believer from his actions and his words.

2. *Infidelis*

But when he brings his son to Jesus's disciples and asks them to drive out his son's evil spirit, they cannot do it. So the man begins to waver in his faith. If Jesus's disciples cannot do it, maybe that's because Jesus himself cannot do it. Maybe Jesus doesn't really have the power over the devil and over evil that the man thought he did.

Perhaps his lurking unbelief was strengthened when he and others began getting upset and arguing with Jesus's disciples. We don't know how the argument went, but we can readily imagine how parts of it might have sounded. We can imagine the experts in the law jumping on the disciples when they are not able to cast out the demon. "See, your teacher is not really the Messiah!" And we can imagine the embarrassed disciples trying to defend themselves, "There must be something specially wrong with this boy or his father that is preventing us from being able to drive out the evil spirit. It's not our fault; it's theirs!"

The man probably has a strange mix of emotions now—disappointment on the one hand and doubts on the other. Maybe his son's evil spirit *is* a punishment for his own sins. Maybe he is the reason why his son is tortured this way!

We later see the man's unbelief on display when Jesus asks him this question: "How long has this been happening to him?" It's hard to say why Jesus asks this question. He asks it as the boy is rolling around on the ground, foaming at the mouth in a convulsion. Maybe as true man, in his state of humiliation, not making full use of his divine knowledge, Jesus is genuinely curious about the details of boy's condition. Maybe he is trying to learn why his disciples were unable to cast the demon out. Or maybe he is simply asking the question to test the man's faith. And in fact, Jesus's question does seem to awaken in the man the realization that his son's condition is very bad and even worse than he first let on. He tells Jesus that his son has been like this ever since he was a child, and although he first told Jesus simply that the spirit would throw his son down, he now acknowledges that it has often thrown him into the fire and into the water in an attempt to kill him.

Maybe it *was* useless to bring his son to Jesus, especially if Jesus can do nothing more than stand there and ask diagnostic questions while his son is rolling around having a demonic episode. But where else can he possibly turn? So he says, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

If you can? If you have the ability? That's not faith. That's unbelief. That's like the prayer the kid says in the 1994 movie *Angels in the Outfield*: "God, if there is a god..." What sort of faith is that? It's not faith at all!

Finally, we can tell that the man also has unbelief because he explicitly says so. "Help my unbelief!" he says. The man is *simul fidelis et infidelis*, simultaneously a believer and an unbeliever.

Sound familiar? There's an unbeliever lurking within all of us, too. How many times do we approach God in faith when we go to him for help in prayer, only to waver in unbelief when it seems as though our situation or circumstances go beyond his ability to help? Maybe that unbelief is strengthened by our experience with Jesus's public ministers, who might not be representing him as they ought to be, perhaps because they are struggling with their own unbelief, putting more trust in themselves than in God.

Jesus is in control, we say. Then we watch or read the news about the latest shooting or other senseless violence or the seemingly senseless destruction caused by a wildfire or hurricane.

Jesus is still Lord of lords, we say. Then we listen to someone talk about how all will be lost if So-and-so is elected, and we nod our heads and say, "I think they're right!"

Jesus is my Savior, we say. Then we find ourselves shamefully returning to our pet sin for the umpteenth time or saying or doing something that we clearly knew better not to say or do, and we say, "It's hopeless. I guess heaven isn't for me."

And so we start throwing up our prayers less often and half-heartedly. "If you can, Jesus, have compassion and help." *Simul fidelis et infidelis*.

3. The Solution

What's the solution? The solution is to recognize and acknowledge our problem, the unbelief that still lurks within us. The solution is to pray to the only one who can help. The EHV translates the man's prayer: "I do believe. Help me with my unbelief!" The NIV translates similarly: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" The problem with most translations is that they give the impression that the man is praying for assistance with his own abilities, as if he

were asking Jesus for a copy of *Overcoming Unbelief for Dummies*, as if he were praying, “Lord, I’ve pretty much got this myself; I just need some help from you.” But that’s not what he prays. The King James Version and the English Standard Version have it right: “I believe; help my unbelief!” I think I know why a lot of translations don’t translate it that way. “Help my unbelief” could be misunderstood as saying, “Make my unbelief stronger.” But in the context, that’s of course not what the man is praying. This is what he is praying: “Jesus, I can’t deal with my unbelief on my own. You address it. You deal with it. You fight it. You eliminate it.”

But the solution isn’t just to ask Jesus for help. The solution is then to receive Jesus’s help by looking to his Word and listening to it. “‘If you can?’ Jesus said to him. ‘All things are possible for the one who believes.’” Notice how Jesus doesn’t say, “All things will be done exactly as asked for the one who believes.” But he does say, “All things are possible.” In other words, Jesus is saying, “In my heavenly wisdom, I may not help your problem, your ailment, your situation as you want me to. But never doubt that I have the ability to do so. Never doubt that I am the King of kings and Lord of lords. Never doubt that I am your Savior.”

And then Jesus proves it with his Word. “When Jesus saw that a crowd was quickly gathering, he rebuked the unclean spirit. ‘You mute and deaf spirit,’ he said, ‘I command you to come out of him and never enter him again!’ The spirit screamed, shook the boy violently, and came out.” Notice how Jesus doesn’t just drive the demon out with his word, though that would be impressive enough. If he was genuinely curious about the boy’s condition before, not making use of his divine knowledge, he makes use of it now. The father never said anything about his boy being deaf. “He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak.” That’s all the boy’s own father knew. But Jesus knows more. “You mute *and deaf* spirit,” Jesus says.

Not only that, but Jesus gives the boy and his father the assurance that this demon will never torment the boy again. On another occasion, Jesus talked about how demons often do precisely that—leave for a while, but then come back with friends and find their original home ready and waiting for a second possession (Matt. 12:43–45). Jesus says, “That shall not happen in this case!” And it doesn’t.

Jesus has the ability, Jesus has the knowledge, Jesus has the compassionate heart to help us. “Begone, unbelief!” he says through his Word. Amen, Jesus! We are simultaneously believers and unbelievers. We do believe in you. Help our unbelief! Let us always trust that all things are possible with you, and that in the case of your promises, they’re not only possible but will certainly come true. Save us from sin, death, and the devil. Rescue us from hell and its power. You are our Savior; you can do it, and you will! Amen.