

A Study of Mark's Gospel

Week Thirteen

Mark 9:11-45

Day One

11 And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"
12 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? 13But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him." 14 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 15As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

v. 11 – The disciples asked Jesus very few theological questions, or at least those questions aren't recorded in the gospel accounts. Most of the questions pertained to His teaching. Here was one they did ask. They had just seen Elijah on the mountain with Jesus. The common teaching was that Elijah, or an Elijah-like prophet, was going to come right before the Messiah. Perhaps they were wondering whether Elijah was then preparing to return in fulfillment of what they had been taught. The Jews would have expected Elijah-like acts and miracles from this precursor to the Messiah. We see once again that their preconceived notions of what would happen blinded them to what was happening.

v. 12 – Jesus responded that the teaching was accurate. A major prophet would indeed precede the Christ. But He interjected another reference to His coming suffering and death. I don't understand the connection between their question and Jesus' question, do you? They asked about Elijah and He asked about His suffering. There must have been a correlation between them expecting a certain kind of Elijah to come and a certain kind of Messiah, both of which were powerful and politically triumphant. Their expectations with both persons were to be disappointed, for neither Elijah nor the Messiah was going to live up to their erroneous expectations.

v. 13 – Who was this Elijah? It was obviously John the Baptist. While the rulers and teachers were looking for a replica of Elijah, they misinterpreted who John was. The leaders mistreated John instead of seeing him as the fulfillment of their own teaching! Because they did not recognize John's function and role, they challenged him and refused to heed his call or ministry of preparing the way of the Lord. It is amazing that spiritual people can have the right doctrine but *not* do the right things or interpret the signs of the times correctly.

v. 14 – The four returned to the main group of disciples and saw a commotion surrounding those who had been left behind. The leaders were arguing with Jesus' men as the crowd watched.

v. 15 – Here we have a *wow 11*, for the people were overwhelmed with amazement when they saw Jesus. Jesus had not even done anything at this point, but the crowd eagerly ran to meet Him. **Is this how you respond to Jesus? Do you run to Him in a spirit of wonder, even before He does anything for you?**

Day Two

16 "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. 17 A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." 19 "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

v. 16 – Jesus wanted to find out what was going on. Obviously the people must have been involved with the argument along with the disciples. It's hard for religious or even spiritual people *not* to argue about spiritual things. I have tried to discipline myself not to argue, for arguments like that seldom if ever win someone over to my side. I do try to follow Peter's guideline, however, in his epistle:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (1 Peter 3:15-16).

It's easier to answer questions that people are asking than to try and impose answers that they are not ready or willing to hear. **Do you agree?**

vs. 17&18 – A man in the crowd spoke up that he had brought his demon-possessed son to the disciples. It seems that the people were aware of the existence of evil spirits and had some idea when people were afflicted with them. They just didn't know how to get free. Those people were more aware than some modern saints who ignore or scoff at the reality and implications of evil spirits. It is a magnificent strategy by the evil one to convince some that he doesn't exist or operate any longer like he did in Jesus' time. That enables him to maneuver with a free hand, since most don't acknowledge the work he does through demons.

The man asked the disciples to cast the spirit out of the son, but they were unable to do so.

v. 19 – Jesus expressed disgust when he heard what had been going on. **Why was He disgusted?** Whatever was happening here, there was no faith, thus Jesus termed those present as an unbelieving generation. Their technique wasn't wrong, nor was the spirit too strong for them. They just didn't have faith. Jesus confronted lack of faith again and again, and He was amazed at the lack of faith among the faith community.

I wonder what Jesus would call today's followers? Do we have any more faith than the disciples did? I don't think so. In fact, we may argue and debate faith and its implications far more than we see that they did in Jesus' day. We dissect faith to learn about faith, but at the end of the day, we have something akin to a dissected frog in front of us. We have all the pieces of faith, but we don't have a living, active faith.

Are you part of the full-of-faith generation or the unbelieving generation? Don't answer too quickly. If you answered the former, where is the proof?

Day Three

20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. 22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." 23 "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

v. 20 – Once the father had explained the situation, he followed Jesus' order to bring the boy to Him. That's good advice for every parent: Bring your children to Jesus so that He can touch them. When the boy got near Jesus, the demon in him threw the boy into a convulsion. At that point, the disciples, the teachers of the law, and the crowd all watched this boy thrash around on the ground—not a pretty sight.

v. 21 – Notice how calm Jesus was! This boy was rolling around on the ground in a demonic fit, and Jesus engaged the father in conversation, asking more questions. As stated earlier, Jesus was not intimidated by our human problems and ailments, whether deafness, blindness or seizures. Jesus remained detached from this situation, assessing the need and the way forward.

v. 22 –The father had seen this many times before. You can sense the anguish he must have felt, how helpless he was to help his son. He was at the end of his rope and all he had up to this point was a religious argument from the crowd. Don't forget that Jesus was up on the mountain while this situation developed. Jesus was never moved by the urgency of the need, only by the prompting of the Father's voice and will. This demon had tried to kill the boy, which is the ultimate goal of every evil spirit. They want to take away life while God wants to give life. Since God wants to give life, the church should have the same mission.

v. 23 – The father talked to Jesus like he would a doctor. "Is there anything you can do, doctor? If you can, please do it!" Jesus immediately focused on that comment "if you can." The issue wasn't whether or not Jesus could do something for the boy. He had proved again and again that He could heal. The issue was the lack of faith that the disciples and teachers of the law seemed to have. The leaders were arguing theology with Jesus' followers while the boy suffered. And the disciples engaged the conversation and lost focus on the needs of the boy.

Jesus responded to the father with a simple statement: All is possible for those who believe. The limitation wasn't with Jesus; He had the power. The limitation was with the others; they had no faith. "Be it done unto you according to your faith" was something Jesus said regularly. The extent of the help given would be determined by the extent of their faith.

There are some people who blame God for their predicament, but they are at least partially to blame. Yet we must be careful. Many well-meaning and sometimes not-so-well-meaning disciples have accused those in need or with physical ailments of not having enough faith. We must be careful when we make such assessments. Jesus could make those assessments and be accurate. We do not know the heart of those around us, so we must not pretend like we do, in the interest of seeming to be spiritual or wanting to help out.

Day Three

24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." 26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

v. 24 – The father responded to Jesus' probing by declaring that he had faith, but he also had some "unfaith." Some people believe that faith and unfaith cannot be present at the same time, and have God respond to that person's faith. This is obviously incorrect. The father had faith, but he doubted, too. Notice that Jesus didn't send him away, saying, "Come back when your faith meter is at 100%." Jesus wasn't turned off by unfaith; He was activated by the faith that was there.

Have you been hesitant to expect a miracle because you didn't think you had enough faith? Then this story brings good news, for you can come to God with the faith that you have and get your need met. Is this what Jesus meant when He said that mustard-seed-size faith is enough to cause God to move on your behalf?

v. 25 – Jesus had been working not to draw too much attention to His work, actually leading people who needed healing away from the crowd. Then He had no choice but to act quickly or else everyone would be clamoring for more miracles and healings. This time there was no spit involved, just the words from His mouth. Jesus commanded the evil spirit not only to come out but also to never come back again. We know from a teaching in another gospel that this is the strategy for some spirits (see Matthew 12:43-45). They go out and move around for a while, and then come back to their original home in the person they had left. Jesus shut the door on this spirit, who could never come back.

What kind of man could have the authority that a demon would listen to, not just in the moment, but for the rest of the boy's life? Only God could have that kind of authority, so this is a proof to me that Jesus was and is God.

vs. 26&27 – The demon had no choice, of course, but to obey immediately. The spirit shrieked. That indicates that demons have the ability to make noise and even communicate. The boy actually got worse for a moment before he was freed. Don't be discouraged if you are facing a situation and doing what you can, only to have it seem worse. The demonic forces may be in their last throes of power and are close to being removed. Not only did the boy get worse, it looked like he was dead! Perhaps the boy was exhausted by the physical exertion initiated by the demon. At any rate, I can imagine that some bystanders could have thought, "Jesus failed! The boy's dead!" **Did you ever think that God had failed or not come through, only to find that you had not seen the whole picture?** Trust God to the end; you will not be disappointed.

Day Four

28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" 29 He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer." 30 They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 31 because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." 32 But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

vs. 28&29 – Jesus retreated from the demands of the crowd and His disciples asked why they were not able to drive out the evil spirit. Jesus' response was simple. That kind of evil spirit only came out through prayer. **What did He mean by that?**

Did you notice how Jesus identified the boy's spirit? It was a deaf and dumb spirit. You would not think that a deaf and dumb spirit would cause the boy to do what he did—throwing himself into the fire and water, thrashing about on the ground, etc. So if you would have looked at the natural signs, you would have thought that the spirit would have been named epilepsy, death or some other malady.

Jesus could correctly identify the spirit, not because He used common sense, but because in prayer He had discerned what spirit the boy had. When did He pray to find that out? I don't know, but I do know that it is a gift of the Spirit to be able to identify spiritual forces that aren't otherwise identifiable.

To one there is given through the Spirit. . .to another distinguishing between spirits (1 Corinthians 12:8&10).

vs. 30&31 – Jesus left town, so to speak, under the cover of darkness. He did not anyone to know where they were. You can feel the urgency as Jesus knew that He must prepare His disciples for His imminent departure. This is now the third instance where He spoke of His coming suffering and death.

Much has been said about Jesus' leadership strategy of handpicking His disciples and then training them through a close, working relationship. While the strategy seemed to be flawed at times, it was vindicated when Jesus left and the Holy Spirit came. These men all gave their lives to bear witness to His truth and they proved themselves worthy of Jesus' faith and investment.

The interesting thing about Jesus' team is that He chose them the same way He had cast out the boy's spirit—through prayer:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles (Luke 6:12-13).

You get the idea that Jesus spent much time in listening prayer, not just in spoken prayer. **How much time do you spend in listening prayer? Enough?**

v. 32 – The disciples were hearing the warning about Jesus' death, but they could not understand it. They did not want to ask, however, for they were afraid. This leads me to ask the question: **Am I not seeking clarity on any issue because I am afraid of what I will learn?** I have often said that God only answers the questions that we ask. **Is there something you are not asking because you are afraid of what the answer may be?** I urge to trust God and get the clarity that you need.

Day Five

33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" 34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. 35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." 36 He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

v. 33 – Jesus came home to His adopted town of Capernaum and asked the disciples a simple question. The disciples had been arguing on the road and He asked them why. Jesus continued to train His men for the day when He would not be there. At this point, He had to work on them getting along. That is still a great challenge for the body of Christ. We are to be known by our love, but sometimes we are known for our lack of it for one another. Perhaps Jesus would ask the same question to denominations and followers today: **What were you arguing about? Is there anything over which you argue with other believers? What is it? Is it really that big of a deal? Can you learn to maintain your beliefs but hold them with grace with those who disagree with you?**

v. 34 – The disciples were once again quiet. Earlier they were quiet because they were afraid. This time they were afraid because they were guilty! They had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. I wonder what criteria they used to measure their own greatness. To this point, we have not seen *any* of them distinguish themselves, except for Peter who had received revelation from the Father concerning who Jesus was. He had also *undistinguished* himself at Jesus transfiguration. So none of them had much going for them in the way of gifts or talents, yet they were in heated debate over greatness. Interesting.

v. 35 – Once again, we see Jesus taking a situation and turning it into a teaching opportunity. He gathered His disciples and explained to them His leadership philosophy, one that He had been living among them. What was it? To be a leader for God, you must not focus on being first but last! That is counterintuitive to everything they knew then and we know now about what a leader is supposed to be. A leader is supposed to be assertive and dynamic, or so we have taught and thought. Jesus introduced a different slant on leadership effectiveness. The godly leader must serve everyone and not expect to be served.

Service doesn't mean weakness, nor is it simply being polite. It requires that we meet the highest priority needs of the people who are following us as we trust Jesus to meet our needs. **Why don't we hear more about this teaching?** Instead we hear about the need for followers to serve leaders and hold up leader's hands, as Hur did for Moses. The reason is that people are afraid there will be uncontrollable chaos if the leader doesn't maintain a tight rein. The leaders share the same concern.

vs. 36&37 – Jesus used a visual aide as He taught on leadership. What was it? He used a child. The child was the example of the attitude that leaders must have, for children don't expect or have any rights or power to demand results. Jesus said that those who don't receive the kind of leader that He described don't receive Him. Even followers who want their leaders to be decisive and strong must adjust their expectations to the qualifications that Jesus described.

Are your expectations of leadership in sync with what Jesus outlined? Does your own leadership style reflect the service and youngest-child mentality? If not, what can you do to adjust your expectations or style to reflect Jesus' mentality here?

Day Six

38 "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." 39 "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us. 41 I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

v. 38 – First, the disciples argued about who among them was the greatest. Next, they took exception to someone who was doing good by driving out demons but was not part

of their group. The disciples were less concerned with the fact that someone was getting help and more concerned with the helper's "credentials." I have seen that dynamic in some church groups and denominations. They would prefer to use someone they can trust in their organization than someone else outside the organization, even if the outsider is more qualified or anointed!

I have to admit that I myself am surprised that someone outside Jesus' immediate group was ministering to others in Jesus' name.

vs. 39&40 – Jesus' command was **not** to stop that person outside their group. Jesus was philosophical about that issue, reasoning that anyone who is for you can't be against you. So He urged the disciples to leave that man alone. This is good advice for the body of Christ today. How many are jealous or resentful that someone who doesn't have their theology or in their group has some measure of success? **Do you have that attitude toward anyone?** If so, you must repent. God doesn't need your permission to use someone else. It is also arrogant to think that you know enough about God to determine who He can use and who He can't. I am not saying you have to agree with everyone or water down your beliefs. I am saying you need to be more tolerant. Remember what Paul did as described in Philippians:

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice (Philippians 1:15-18).

Paul did not mind even if someone was preaching from bad motives, as long as they were preaching.

v. 41 – Jesus followed up His perspective on the "stranger" who was ministering, by explaining that anyone doing something good in the name of Jesus is worthy of being rewarded, not condemned, questioned or criticized. John was ready to stop the one doing good because that person wasn't a member of the official disciple group. In some sense, Jesus was telling John that he should be looking for a way to reward that person, not give him a hard time.

Day Seven

42"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. 43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

v. 42 – These next verses seem to be a bit disjointed. They are also difficult to tie into the verses immediately preceding, but let's give it a try. Jesus had just said that anyone who rewards someone for doing something good in Jesus' name will himself be rewarded. Anyone who causes someone in their simplicity of faith to stumble is in big trouble with Jesus. That is why, in my opinion, God doesn't judge things that more mature people think He should judge. He does not want to hurt the faith of the young believer unless He absolutely must.

v. 43-45 – It seems that Jesus made a transition here to set the priorities straight. The disciples were not to be ruthless with those who were doing good in Jesus' name; they were to be ruthless in dealing with the sin in their own lives. One of the basic rules of biblical interpretation is context, and I am trying to be faithful to the context here. Since I have not seen it shift since John posed his comment about the man who wasn't a part of them who was casting out demons.

Of course, Jesus was not advocating mutilation in an effort to deal with sin. He was in favor, however, of keeping priorities in order where sin was concerned. When I used to minister in prisons, the inmates all seemed to choose the same sins with which they had to deal—smoking, cursing and more Bible reading. It seemed like the Holy Spirit never convicted anyone of racism, wife abuse or child neglect. My point is that the inmates weren't being ruthless with sin; they were picking and choosing to deal with their pet peeves and minor irritations.

What's more, the inmates were a judgmental group, not tolerant of any doctrinal deviations. They would have been better served to be ruthless with all the sin in their lives and less ruthless with the foibles of others. **Does this make any sense to you? Do you agree or disagree with my interpretation here? If you disagree, feel free to write me with your own.**