

Coming Off the Mountain

Mark 9:14-29

February 4-5, 2017

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Beth and I are coming off a mountaintop experience as we just returned from a week in Virginia to see Jamie and Lydia, our son-in-law and daughter, who just happen to be the parents of our grandson Philip, or as he's more affectionately known – Pip. Here are a few *piptures*...

It was wonderful to spend time with them for a few days and while we wish we could have stayed longer, we're not meant to live on the mountaintop.

Deuteronomy 11:11 says: ***“But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys...”*** The Christian life has mountaintop experiences *and* excruciating valleys; faith *and* doubt; victories *and* defeats; triumphs *and* trials; praises *and* problems; joy *and* junk.

Last weekend we focused on the splendor and supremacy of Jesus as He was transfigured on top of the mountain. We learned that *a glimpse of glory will keep us going*. While Peter may have wanted to turn this experience into a prolonged camping trip, Jesus wants His followers to know that they can't stay on the mountaintop. The air is too thin, there's not much to eat and there's work to be done in the valley. *If we want to share in the glory above, we must follow Him into sufferings below*. The glory on the mountain helps us deal with the garbage in the valley.

Almost 500 years ago a painter named Raphael captured these two truths when he showed the glory of the transfiguration in the top half of a painting and the suffering of people at the bottom. The two scenes are actually joined together as we will see in our passage today. Please turn to Mark 9.

The Situation in the Valley

As Peter, James and John are descending the mountain with Jesus, they're involved in a theological discussion about Elijah. As they come back to the reality of sin, suffering, Satan and sickness, at least four things hit them.

1. Large crowds. They no doubt enjoyed their spiritual retreat away from the throngs of people but that all changes in verse 14: ***“And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them...”*** While the three were up on the mountain, the other nine were hip deep in need. When Christ shows up, the crowd crushes around Him in verse 15: ***“And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him.”*** To be ***“greatly amazed”*** means, ***“greatly alarmed and utterly astonished.”***

2. Lots of conflict. Whenever you have lots of people, you have lots of problems. Someone has said, ***“Where there’s two or three gathered...there’s conflict.”*** Specifically, we read that the ***“scribes were arguing with them.”*** The scribes were religious experts and were disputing with the disciples because they couldn’t help a hurting boy. The word for ***“arguing”*** means, ***“to mock and confront.”***

In verse 16, Jesus asks, ***“What are you arguing about with them?”*** I love how this question draws the attention away from the humiliated disciples and puts it on the holiness of Christ. In verse 18, we read that the disciples were not able to cast out a demon that was set on destroying a young boy: ***“So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.”*** Those closest to Christ were powerless to help. I wonder if people look at Christ followers in a similar way today? When we’re faced with real needs and problems, do people wonder why the church is so impotent and out of touch?

Have you noticed that there’s some conflict going on in our country today? Followers of Jesus are called to live within a world that is out of whack...and to make a difference. We must be salt and light. That’s not easy to do, is it? I’m grieved by all the harsh rhetoric and inflamed attacks that have saturated social media and the air waves today. While that’s the way the world often responds, I long for Christians to have a different response, especially as it relates to our tone. We can disagree, but we can do so agreeably. I appreciated a post I read this week entitled, ***“Seven Ways to do Political Punditry Wrong in a Polarized World”*** from pastor Kevin DeYoung. Here are three that stood out to me.

- **Always defend your side, no matter what.**
- **Be quick to demonize opponents on the other side.**
- **Go public with your thoughts when you are most hurt and most angry.**

I fear that there’s not only conflict in our country, but also in the church today. While we might have different views on politics, we *are* united in Christ, right?

Right? If we really believe in the sanctity and dignity of all life, then let's love our enemies and continue to minister to the marginalized and the most vulnerable in our world today...and respond lovingly toward those who see things differently than we do.

3. Lives that are in spiritual combat. The enemies of Christ are mocking the followers of Christ because they are unable to help a hurting boy who is being tormented by an evil spirit. The boy's dad summarizes the situation in verses 17-18: ***“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.”*** Luke 9:38 tells us this was the man's only son.

4. Loss of confidence. The dad was not able to get any help from those closest to Christ, even though Jesus had earlier given them authority over evil spirits: ***“So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.”*** The nine disciples no doubt felt like spiritual failures.

The Savior is Victorious in the Valley

We can detect a bit of exasperation from Jesus toward the disciples as he references Psalm 95:10 in verse 19: ***“And he answered them, ‘O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?’”*** The expression ***“O,”*** is a word of deep anguish and was seldom used in addressing someone directly.

When Jesus calls them faithless, he's getting to the heart of the matter – it was, and is, always a matter of belief. Because the disciples are slow to get this, Jesus wonders how much longer He'll be able to bear with their unbelief. God says something similar in Numbers 14:11: ***“How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?”***

With compassion toward a dad and his son, Jesus commands, ***“Bring him to me.”*** This has the idea of carrying since this boy was so tormented he could barely walk. Once the boy is brought to Jesus his healing has already begun.

Look at verse 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.”*** When evil spirits see the Savior, they react

strongly because they know who He is and how powerful He is. The demon again attempts to destroy the boy as it **“convulsed”** him, which is the same word used for lacerating or tearing. The boy fell on the ground and started rolling around, once again foaming at the mouth.

Even though Jesus already knows the situation, he wants the dad to describe how dire it is in verse 21: **“How long has this been happening to him?”** This sounds like something a doctor would ask a patient with lots of presenting problems. The dad answers in verses 21-22: **“From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him...”** This has gone on a long time and was totally consuming. The dad did all he could to pull his son out of fires and open bodies of water. The boy’s problems were prolonged and pervasive. We see here that the devil’s goal is to destroy. Revelation 9:11 refers to his name in Hebrew as Abaddon (destruction) and in Greek Apollyon (Destroyer).

The father’s faith in Jesus is beginning to grow, though it doesn’t start out very promising: **“But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”** The man isn’t entirely sure Jesus is capable of healing his son but appeals to His compassion. Since the disciples couldn’t do it, and they represented Christ, then he questioned whether Christ could do it. The principle basic to being a disciple was this: *“the messenger of a man is as the man himself.”* We must remember that we represent Christ to people – when we bail on Him, others will think that Jesus will fail them too.

*You are writing a gospel, a chapter every day,
By the deeds that you do, and the words that you say;
Men read what you write, distorted or true,
Say, what is the gospel according to you?*

Notice also how much this dad is identifying with his son when he uses the word, **“us”** twice. His son’s situation has affected his whole family. We see that with our grandson Pip who has a genetic disorder. His condition affects Jamie and Lydia and how they care for him, especially when it comes to what he’s allowed to eat. We watched Lydia carefully weigh out everything that goes in his mouth to make sure his levels don’t get too high because the disorder he has can lead to mental retardation if they don’t stay on top of it. Because this affects them, it affects us because we are family.

Jesus does some correcting in verse 23 when He says: **“If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.”** The question is not in Jesus’ ability to heal but in the father’s ability to believe.

Jesus rebukes the man and then tells him that all things are possible because He can do anything. I love how responsive he is to the teaching of Jesus in verse 24: **“Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’”** The word **“help”** is a present imperative, meaning *“continuous assistance.”* This is the same word used in verse 20 – *“If you can, help me.”* The father is saying something like this: *“Then, help me, just as I am, a doubter.”*

I see two phases in this man’s faith journey...

- Phase 1: *No faith, some doctrine.* He knew that Jesus was compassionate but he wasn’t so sure He could help his son. He doubts the power of Jesus but not His character.
- Phase 2: *Low faith, some doubt.* When we bring the little faith we have and ask for more, Jesus multiplies the little we have. Remember this – low faith is better than no faith! Jesus is drawn not to perfect righteousness but to repentant helplessness. He is waiting for us to humble ourselves and to say that we need help.

Doubt Does Not Disqualify

When you have a bout with doubt, remember that doubt doesn’t disqualify you.

Instead of throwing daggers at doubters, we’re called to be compassionate towards those who have questions. We see God’s heart in Jude 22: **“And have mercy on those who doubt.”**

One of the clearest expressions of doubt is found right before Jesus gives the Great Commission to His disciples in Matthew 28. You would think that the disciples had dealt with their doubts and now that Jesus is alive they’re ready to move out in faith. Look at verses 16-17: **“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.”**

It’s fascinating to me that Jesus doesn’t say something like this: *“Those of you who are worshipping, you go and make disciples. Those of you who dealing with doubt,*

*you stay where you are until you got it all figured out.” No, he tells the whole group: “**Go and make disciples...**” Even though some doubted, Jesus sends them out anyway. *The very act of telling the Good News helps your own heart to believe it.**

If you’re having a bout with doubt, let me mention seven ways to move from doubt to faith from Ray Pritchard. A few of these are found in his booklet called, “If I Believe, Why Do I Doubt?” We have some copies on the Resource Table. We also posted a free link on “Sermon Extras” on the app and our website.

1. Admit your doubts and ask for help. That’s what the dad did in our passage. In the parallel account in Matthew 17:20, Jesus says that our faith need only be the size of a mustard seed. We often think we need “big faith,” but actually just a tiny amount of faith in a big God is all we need. It has been said that no truth is so strongly believed as that which you once doubted.

2. Recognize that faith is a choice, not a feeling. When Jesus saw that his disciples were faltering because of their feelings, He asked this question in Luke 24:38: “*Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?*”

3. Don’t be afraid to “borrow” some faith. I’m reminded of the man who was paralyzed and was brought to Jesus by his friends in Mark 2:5: “*When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’*”

4. Act on your faith, not your doubts. As Jesus turned to Thomas, he says to us, “*Stop doubting and believe*” (John 20:27). One of the most helpful things I’ve heard Ray say is this: “*Biblical faith is belief plus unbelief...and then acting on the belief part.*”

5. Doubt your doubts, not your faith. *Believe your beliefs and doubt your doubts.* Too many of us allow our doubts to define our lives. The most important thing to do when faced with doubt is to follow Jesus Christ, one step at a time. Jesus still gives this invitation: “*Come, follow me*” (Matthew 4:19). Joni Erickson Tada says, “*Faith isn’t the ability to believe long and far into the misty future. It’s simply taking God at His Word and taking the next step.*”

6. There are some things you will never understand until heaven. If you are waiting until you have everything figured out before you’ll put your faith in Him,

you'll be waiting forever. One pastor puts it like this: "*God is bigger than you, so get over it!*" Hebrews 11:6: "***And without faith it is impossible to please God...***"

7. Keep going back to what you know to be true. Don't doubt in the darkness what you know to be true in the sunshine. Sometimes you believe because of what you see; sometimes you believe in spite of what you see. 2 Timothy 1:12: "***But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed.***"

After the father cried out and said that he had low faith but asked for it to grow, Jesus went to work in verses 25-27: "***And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together*** [Jesus avoided crowds when he thought their motives were unworthy], ***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.'*** [these words must have brought great comfort to the father] ***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.***" We see both the power and the tenderness of Jesus here and are reminded that according to 1 John 3:8, Jesus came to "***destroy the works of the devil.***"

Homeschool Lessons

I'm glad that the disciples weren't perfect, aren't you? I like that they doubted and messed up because it makes it easier to relate to them. Jesus takes advantage of a teaching opportunity with them in verses 28-29: "***And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' And he said to them, 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.'***"

The saddest part of this encounter is not the condition of the boy, or the mocking of the scribes or the faltering faith of the father – it's the powerlessness of the disciples. Tim Keller says: "*they underestimated the power of evil in the world and in themselves.*"

The disciples had just been going through the motions. They may have said the right words but they were powerless because they were prayerless. They had to learn that previous success is no guarantee of continued power because we must exhibit radical reliance in our present situations.

Prayer is the vital link between the power on the mountaintop and the desperate problems in the valley. Victory in the valley comes through praise and prayer.

We've said this before but it bears repeating: *There's no way to grow as a disciple without practicing the spiritual disciplines because spiritual growth is intentional, not automatic.* One way we want to foster growth is by providing a Bible Reading Guide each month. This month our theme is "Walking by Faith" as we read through Romans, Galatians and Ephesians. You can find copies in the lobby or by going to our website through our mobile app.

God never turns an honest doubter away. I like what Hudson Taylor said: "*God isn't looking for people of great faith, but for individuals ready to follow Him.*"

I'll never forget a poster I saw over 35 years ago that showed a group of scholars and theologians arguing over a passage of Scripture. They were animated and obviously angry and some were pointing at others with menacing looks on their faces. On the other side of the poster people were hunched over as if carrying great burdens, walking toward a cliff. Some of them had fallen off and were headed to the gaping fires of hell, all while the "church people" were in their Christian cocoons debating theology.

We must meet with the Lord through spiritual disciplines but we must always come down the mountain to meet the needs of a dying and perishing world. I like what C.T. Studd said: "*Some want to live within the sound of the church and chapel bell, but I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.*"

This past week I read the first prayer in the classic book, *The Valley of Vision*. I'd like to pray it for us right now.

"Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, thou hast brought me to the valley of vision, where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights; hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold thy glory. Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive, that the valley is the place of vision. Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells, and the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine; let me find thy light in my darkness, thy life in my death, thy joy in my sorrow, thy grace in my sin, thy riches in my poverty thy glory in my valley."

Jesus often taught His followers in a private room or house, much smaller than this one. The last time He met with His closest followers the night before He died, He

called them together for a meal filled with meaning. And the memory of this meal, and what it represents, helps followers like us keep the vision fresh while we come off the mountain above to live in the valley below.

Communion helps us remember what we have in common. Listen to the words found in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26: ***“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”***

- Communion is designed to stimulate in our hearts **remembrance** of the person and work of Jesus. The focus isn’t on Moses or Elijah or anyone else. As we pointed out last week from Mark 9:8 – ***“But Jesus only.”***
- This remembrance involves the use of **tangible elements** – the bread and the cup. The action of eating and drinking reminds us that we spiritually “ingest” and depend upon Jesus and the saving benefits of his life, death, and resurrection.

We’re called to remember what He’s done at His first coming and we **proclaim** the Lord’s death until He comes again. In verses 27-28 we’re also called to consider how we’re doing in the present: ***“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”***

- We must not take it in an **unworthy** manner. That means we don’t come complacently without considering the weightiness of what it represents.
- Instead, we’re to **“examine ourselves.”** We’re to test our motives and attitudes and have the right understanding of what the elements represent. That’s why it’s important to have your children wait until they are saved *and* old enough to be able to examine themselves. Do an inventory right now and confess any sins that the Holy Spirit brings to mind. This would be a great time to pray, *“Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”*

Prayer Time

Some churches practice closed communion but we practice *close* communion for those who are followers of Jesus Christ.

Distribution of Elements

Closing Song: “Jesus Messiah”

New Members – Bob and Pam Mattison (8 am)