

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 30 April

Children's Talk: Speaking Up

Today we are going to read a story about a boy that was possessed by a mute spirit. Can anyone tell me what it means to be mute? Someone who is mute is unable to talk. So in this story we will read about a boy who could not talk because of the spirit who was possessing him. And the spirit tries to harm the boy. But listen to what the Lord does for Him.

Mark 9:21 So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?"

And he said, "From childhood. ²² And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

Mark 9:23 Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things *are* possible to him who believes."

Mark 9:24 Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

Mark 9:25 When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "Deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!" ²⁶ Then *the spirit* cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, "He is dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

So what in the end happened to the boy? Right, He was healed. Now could the boy ask for help? No, his father had to ask for help for him. It was obvious that his father loved him a lot so he spoke on his behalf.

Now I want to talk about what it would be like to be mute. I want each of you to think of something that you care about a lot. It could be a place you like to go, it could be a movie or a book, it could be a person or event. And now I want each of you to turn to the person next to you. And each one of you is going to get a chance to share that special thing that you love with the person next to you. But you're going to be mute; so I want you to share without opening your mouth. Try to share with the other person, and I'll tell you when you can switch.

Now wasn't that frustrating? It is frustrating when we have something that we care about but we cannot express it. No one can hear what we have to offer. No one can listen to us. Well the Lord can heal us of that; He can cast out that spirit. And the way the Lord heals our muteness is by giving us truths. When you know in your heart that you need to be kind, but cannot explain it to anyone, it is frustrating. So the Lord in His Word gives you the words that will let you explain why it is so important to be kind. Etc.

Believing the Unbelievable

A sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
30 April, 2023

Introduction

Have you ever been asked to believe in something that on the face of it is unbelievable? Or perhaps have you known something was impossible but so desperately needed it to be true that you continued to believe? There are times when the Lord's truth appears this way; and we find that we need to reach out and believe in the unbelievable.

Part I: Possessed by a Spirit

The story that we read in the children's talk centers on a boy possessed by a mute spirit and the father who desperately wanted the Lord to heal the boy. He had already brought the boy to the disciples but they could not heal him; we can imagine the father's hopes fading.

I want to first focus on the nature of the spirit that was cast out of the boy. This nature shows us the spiritual symptoms that we ourselves suffer at times. The first one mentioned is that he was mute; he could not speak; he could not ask for help, his father had to do that for him. We are told that not being able to speak represents an inability to confess the Lord and declare our faith in Him because we do not have enough knowledge (*Arcana Coelestia* 6988). Now imagine having a desire in your heart and yet having no way of expressing it. We saw in the children's talk how difficult it is to share with someone without words and in the teen talk how frustrating it is to not have the words to convey what we love and feel and believe. On the highest level to be mute is to not know enough about the Lord to be firm in our convictions about Him and about spiritual life.

If we see ourselves as the father then we get a picture of ourselves when we want to have a deep faith in the Lord but cannot see how or cannot bring ourselves to do so: we either cannot find the words or cannot bring ourselves to say the words that would commit us to faith. We can see that desire in the love of the father for his son: he begged the Lord to have compassion on him and help him and cried out with tears. When the Lord arrived He made it clear that it was a lack of faith that held back the disciples from healing the boy: “O faithless (ἀπιστος) generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?” (Mark 9:19).

So what does it look like when you or I find ourselves in this position? It is when you're in your office, it's 5:00, you know you need to stay late to get work done, but is that level of integrity really going to make a difference to anyone? Or you're at home and your wife is gone for the night and you're flipping through channels and come across a scintillating movie; does fantasizing about other women and watching a dirty film really have a negative effect on your marriage? She'll never know after all. Or it's 9:30 Sunday morning, you're in bed, and have no desire to get up and take the family to church; is giving up your short-term happiness week after week really going to pay off in a heavenly eternity, or is that just a pipe dream and you're wasting your Sundays off for no gain? Or you start to feel the restrictions that being religious puts on the fun you could have; is it actually going to set me free or am I going to spend the rest of my life missing out on all the fun I could have had? These scenarios are just a few of the examples of times when we start to have doubts about the Lord; they hold us back from being open with ourselves about commitment and faith: I don't want to speak that commitment, because then I would lose the good thing I've got going. We are mute.

There is a real impact to staying in a place of doubt. When we leave open the possibility that our spiritual code of conduct isn't true we start to justify our indulgences: because I'm not sure, it's ok to indulge just a little. I'll stop once I'm certain about what's true. That is represented by the fire that the demon tried to throw the boy into. Our doubts give us an excuse to throw ourselves into our burning selfish desire. We also then try to drown ourselves in a sea of excuses, justifications, and false principles, just as the demon tried to drown the boy in the water.

Part II: The Wait and See Attitude

The problem with having doubts then is that while we are trying to sort them out we meanwhile don't feel compelled to act on our beliefs. Now having doubts in itself is not a bad thing: doubts are what let us consciously choose what to believe. But when we let them linger as a way of holding onto our evils then lack of faith becomes a huge problem. We develop a wait and see attitude. By default we'd rather have the Lord prove that He is able to get us through something before we'll believe that He can get us through it.

Yet with this attitude we are going to be waiting a long time before we see anything true. The Lord needs us to believe in Him before He will step in and move us along in our regeneration, our spiritual growth and rebirth; He does not go where He is not invited. He does this to preserve our freedom. If He simply fixed all of our problems before we believed that He could lead us through them, our faith would be forced upon us, and indeed it would be a shallow faith. It is only when we consciously choose to trust the Lord without proof that faith enters into our hearts and reflects our true character.

Even when the Lord was in the world performing incredible miracles He never used them to take away people's freedom to have faith. Many times before He would heal someone He would ask about their faith, and when some were healed He told them, "your faith has saved you" (Mark 5:34; Matthew 8:10-13; 9:2, 22, 27-29; 13:57, 58; 15:28; 21:21, 22, 31, 32; Mark 5:34, 36; 10:49, 52; Luke 7:9, 48-50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42, 43). When the Lord went into His hometown there were many people there who did not believe in Him. They said, "This is just Jesus, Joseph's son! We know His family; He's just the son of a carpenter!" Because they did not believe in the Lord, He could not perform any miracles there other than a few small healings (Mark 6:4). They did not believe and so the Lord was not willing to take away that disbelief by force. Only those who have faith are able to see the proof of their faith. Waiting for proof just gives us an excuse not to commit.

Part III: Belief in the Unbelievable

In the face of this mindset the Lord offers to us the same statement that he offered to the father: "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes (πιστεύοντι)" (Mark 9:23). This is the only way his son could be healed. I want to sit with this statement a bit because it is a powerful statement. Really it's an absurd statement: "ALL THINGS are possible to him who believes." We might be more inclined to believe it if He said, "Many things are possible to him who believes." But He did not. He intentionally made this statement as extreme as possible and I think that He did that to make us pause; He is not talking about some half-effort faith. He is asking us to believe that *anything* is possible with God.

Later in the Gospel of Mark Jesus puts this statement in even stronger terms. He says,

Have faith in God; for assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be removed and be cast into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. (Mark 11:22-24)

Whatever you could possibly want is possible. We cannot even conceive of what that even means, much less believe it completely. So how is it that the Lord can provide that all things are possible for one who believes? It has to do with only willing what the Lord provides. In other words, rather than wanting things and expecting the Lord to provide them, we must trust that the Lord will provide what we need and then only seeking what He provides and nothing more. Listen to this amazing statement from the Writings for the New Church:

Jesus said, "If you were to have faith, if you say to this mountain, 'Rise up, cast thyself into the sea,' it shall be done; indeed all the things that you ask believing, you shall get" (Matthew 21:21-22).

By these words is described the power of those who are in the Lord. They do not will anything, and so do not seek anything, except from the Lord, and whatever they will and ask from the Lord, the same is done, for the Lord says, 'Without Me you cannot do anything, abide in Me and I in you.' The angels in heaven have such power that if only they will a thing they obtain it; but yet they do not will anything but what is of use, and they will this as if from themselves, but still from the Lord. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §951)

The power of faith then is not that we can magically have whatever we want; the power of faith is that if we first bring our faith into line with the Lord's will and desire for us, then we will lack absolutely nothing that we desire. We can only do this if we are willing to first trust the Lord and then receive His blessing.

When we are sitting in whatever situation it might be contemplating our need to give up our idea of what is possible and impossible and trust the Lord's idea of what is possible, it is OK to have doubts. Those doubts though must be secondary to our desire and willingness to believe. Consider the father's response to the Lord

when told that all things are possible for him who believes: “Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe (πιστεύω); help my unbelief (ἀπιστία)!’” (Mark 9:24). His desire to save his son was enough for Him to trust the Lord. He still acknowledged the difficulty, even the impossibility of having complete trust, but he was entirely willing to put that doubt aside and ask for the Lord’s help.

Conclusion

The message of this story is captured in the conversation between the Lord and His disciples that concludes it. The disciple asked the Lord privately why they had not been able to cast out the spirit. The Lord’s answer is “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29). Here we have the two keys that will lead us through doubt into faith: first we must pray. That is, we seek the Lord even before we are sure He is with us; He does not go where He is not invited. Secondly we must fast. That is, we must give up our own delight for a time so that our hunger for what is good can return. This then is the message of our story: The father called out to the Lord and made obvious his desire for the goodness that the Lord offered: with tears in his eyes he cried, “Lord I believe; help my unbelief!” And because of his earnest request and his trust, his son was freed.

Amen.