**JESUS CHALLENGES AN UNBELIEVING GENERATION**

February 1, 2015

Luke 9:37-45

Key Verse 9:41 “‘O unbelieving and perverse generation,’ Jesus replied, ‘how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.”

In today’s passage, we find the failure of the disciples and the power of Jesus. Have you ever felt powerless? Do you at times feel completely helpless? You certainly would if you were possessed by a demon. However, that is not likely your condition. But you still may feel completely helpless as you wrestle with a medical issue, or a relational issue, or a work-related issue, or a financial issue, or, most importantly, a spiritual issue. Well, do not despair, because, if this story teaches us anything, it teaches us that Jesus helps the helpless. We also learn about an unbelieving and perverse generation, and Jesus’ mercy to put up with them. In the final verses, Jesus tells us to listen carefully to what he is about to tell us, but the disciples didn’t listen, because they didn’t like what he had to say.

I. O unbelieving and perverse generation (37-41)

Look at verse 37. “The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him.” In the last passage, Jesus took three of his disciples and went up a high mountain to pray. The other nine disciples were left below. While Jesus was praying on the mountain, his appearance was changed, and his face shone as bright as the sun. It was a glory beyond our imagination. Peter never wanted to come down, but to stay up on the mountain forever, basking in the rays of divine glory and enjoying heavenly peace. Peter never liked the idea of Jesus being crucified for the sins of the world. But after one night, Jesus came down from the mountain. As Jesus came down from the world of heavenly peace, he reentered the fallen world, and was immediately confronted by a scene of failure, accusations, unbelief, perversion, and demonic power. It is the contrast between the Kingdom of God and the demonic Kingdom of Satan. We cannot influence the world if we separate ourselves from it. We cannot influence the campus if we don’t step a foot on it. So let us learn from Jesus who refused to take an easy way to glory, but who came down from the mountain to complete his mission in a fallen world. Let’s make friends with unbelievers to share the gospel.

What did Jesus find below? Look at verses 38-40. A man in the crowd called out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out but they could not.” There was an evil spirit tormenting a boy. The boy’s father was also tormented, as he watched his only child suffering. We read that this demon threw the boy into convulsions so that he foamed at the mouth. It sounds like a medical condition, but it was a demon. Not all convulsions are caused by demons, but a demon can cause convulsions, as a way of inflicting suffering on its victim. Matthew chapter 17 adds that the boy would often fall into fire or water. These were not random convulsions. So the father had to constantly watch him, to make sure that the demon did not kill him with burning or drowning. Verse 39 says, “It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him.”

As we read these words, we can feel this father’s anguish. We cannot imagine the suffering of this child and his father. When we see people suffering from such horrible conditions, we feel overcome with grief. Why is Satan so powerful? And why is he allowed to destroy people? When we see such suffering, some question God’s love, or his power. Satan seems to be in complete control. The next verse only made Satan seem even stronger. Look at verse 40. “I begged your disciples to drive it out but they could not.” How is it that the disciples failed? We know that in the previous chapter, Jesus sent them out 2 by 2 and they were powerful and drove out demons everywhere. But now there were 9 of them, and they could not drive out even one demon. What had happened?

We might imagine that it happened like this: Jesus went up on a mountain to pray with three disciples. The other nine disciples immediately developed a vacation mentality. Although they knew that Jesus went up on the mountain to pray, they were relaxing below. Then a man came, bringing his son who was demon-possessed to Jesus to be healed. He asked to see Jesus, but the disciples told him that Jesus had gone up on the mountain. Maybe Philip spoke up, “It’s OK. We don’t need Jesus, anyway, because we’ve done this many times before. I’m a professional. I can cast out the demon. Demon! In Jesus’ name, come out.” But the child just yawned. Maybe Matthew then spoke up, “Philip! You didn’t do it right.” Then with a dramatic wave of the hands and a booming voice, he cried, “Evil spirit! Come out in the name of Jesus!” But instead of being healed, the demon threw him into a terrible convulsion. The father begged, “Please help us!” So Simon the Zealot stepped forward, but he failed too. One by one, each disciple tried and failed. As each one failed, the father’s hope was shaken time and again. All of the people in the crowd watched too, and their faith was shaken also. It seemed like Jesus’ name had no power. Before this demon, even Jesus’ disciples were powerless. Even the disciples themselves became confused and felt weak. The first effect of the failure of God’s people is that it shakes everyone’s faith in Jesus. When the disciples were unbelieving, they were not a source of blessing or encouragement. They could not be representatives of Christ.

We can relate to the disciples. Have you ever felt powerless? Yes! We know even right now of some people who are demon possessed, but who we clearly are powerless to help. And when we fail, our faith is shaken, and God’s enemies gloat. Among my own Bible students, I have sat and watched powerlessly by while Satan carried some of them off. There is only so much failure that someone can take, before you start to expect to fail. And I think many people here have no expectation that God will show up in power and change our hopeless situations. The disciple’s powerlessness was a strange and confusing thing to them. But why did the disciples fail? Jesus’ response points us towards an answer. Look at verse 41. “‘O unbelieving and perverse generation,’ Jesus replied, ‘how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.’” We might have expected Jesus to offer words of encouragement or compassion. Or if Jesus was going to rebuke, we might suppose that he should rebuke the father for his lack of faith, or the disciples for their failure.

But instead, Jesus’ first words were very unexpected. He rebuked the entire generation. It does not seem fair. Most of the people of that generation had never heard of this boy. Why were they rebuked? It was because Jesus saw this boy’s problem as indicative of the entire generation. Up on the mountain, Jesus had experienced heavenly glory. When he came down, he immediately was confronted with the fallen world. If it had not been this child’s demon possession, it would have been something else. All of these things are indicative of the fallen world, where demons destroy while people are powerless. When we look at the gospels, we find that Jesus has much to say about his generation, none of it good. He compares them to people of Nineveh: “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.” (Mt 12:41) Jesus labeled his generation as unbelieving and perverse. In Greek, the word “perverse” means “to distort, to turn aside from the right path.” Someone is perverse when they twist God’s truth, or when they reject what is right and follow their own desires. In Romans chapter 1, we can find a long list of perversions, such as “envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice” (Ro 1:29). Generally people agree that perversity is evil. If you call someone a “pervert” they will be offended. What is interesting is that this passage in Romans makes a connection between all such perversions and unbelief. It declares that the root cause of perversion is unbelief.

Friedrich Nietzsche was born to a Lutheran minister. When he was 5 years old, his father and his younger brother died. He also suffered from migraine headache. He could not believe that a loving God would allow these tragic events to happen. So he rejected the God of the Bible. He boldly declared, “God is dead.” His unbelief in the loving God led him to perversion and he became the enemy of Christianity, and died in insanity. Until his death, he never made peace with God.

When we pray for our generation, we must also pray for ourselves, because we live in such a generation. We are influenced daily, even without knowing it. We test God’s patience. We also can marvel that Jesus has stayed with us and put up with us so far, through all of our unbelief and perversity. Let us then not try the patience of God, but repent with sincere hearts. In verse 41, Jesus points his disciples to why they had failed to drive out the demon. Jesus indicates that the problem is unbelief. In Matthew’s account, Jesus more clearly explains: The disciples asked why they could not drive it out, and Jesus responded, “because you have so little faith.” (Mt 17:20) In Mark’s account, Jesus also points out their failure to pray and fast (Mk 9:29 with text note). We can interpolate that the disciples had probably depended on their past experience. They may have thought of the work of God like a chef’s recipe: add flour, water, and eggs then bake and out comes bread. If you just repeat the same procedure, you should get the same result. But the work of God is not a formula. God works according to our faith. Why didn’t the disciples pray? Because they felt that they did not need to. They already had faith – faith in themselves and their past experience.

We do not want to keep failing, time after time, or to live in a culture of powerlessness. We do not want to quake constantly before the strength of one demon, so that we have no hope for the power of God to drive out the Kingdom of Satan. We do not want to go to campus with the expectation that we will fail every time. If this is what we do not want, then we need to let go of our past experience, all of our formulas of what used to work. Instead, we need to begin praying earnestly and with fasting. We all know that we see someone who needs our help, but are we praying and fasting for him/her? We need to challenge our unbelief, and depend on the power of God. When we repent of our unbelief, we must revive our expectation. As a constantly defeated and beaten down church, we need to newly find God’s victory over the world and the demonic forces at work in this generation.

II. Jesus’ victory and coming betrayal (42-45)

Look at verses 42-43a. “Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.” The demon resisted Jesus’ efforts. To the end, it fought to harm the boy and frighten the people. This was all to plant doubt in the people and especially the father. Where God is working, Satan is also working to destroy. Therefore, we need the strength of Jesus to overcome. The demon fought, but Jesus overcame. He drove out the demon with his rebuke. What had seemed impossible for the disciples proved to be a simple matter for Jesus. The demon who had seemed to be the unquestioned greatest power in the world was found to be powerless before Jesus. All of the people were amazed. They marveled at all that Jesus did. In an ironic sense, even the disciples’ failure brought glory to God, because it made his victory over the demon all the more impressive. I can find hope in this, that God’s work is not hindered by my mistakes but may bring glory to God.

No sooner had Jesus won this victory than he took his disciples aside, and brought them back down to earth. When the disciples saw Jesus power, they always got visions of a beautiful earthly kingdom, where Jesus reigns and they serve as governors. It was the traditional Jewish view of the Messiah. So, for the past several passages, Jesus keeps bringing them back to reality. He keeps reminding them of his true mission to be crucified for the sins of the world. And they keep not listening. Look at verses 44-45. “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.” On the mountain of transfiguration, the Father spoke from a cloud, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him.” But they didn’t. Now Jesus says strong words, “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you.” But they didn’t. Instead, it says that they did not understand what this meant, and they were afraid to ask him about it. This means that they actually understood – his language was simple enough – they just wanted to close their ears and didn’t want to know.

Let us sincerely repent of unbelief. Let us revive our expectation of God’s powerful working in our midst. And let us sincerely pray for our generation to believe in God.