

Taking Out the Word Impossible

Mark 9:14-29 (NIV)

¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. 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 "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." 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 one who believes." 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 impure 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. 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."

Jesus had entered his final year before going to the cross. In an amazing event, he showed a brief glimpse of his true glory as God for all eternity to Peter, James, and John as he was transfigured on a mountaintop. Jesus and these three disciples were now on their way to be reunited with the other 9 when "they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them." (verse 14b) What was going on?

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 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." (verses 17-18) This was not an ordinary medical issue. This was a spiritual and physical crisis as an evil spirit had possessed the boy from childhood and showed itself in these very physical ways. It had gotten so bad, that, as the father related, this evil spirit "has often thrown [the boy] into fire or water to kill him." (verse 22a) It's messed up.

"You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (verse 19) Jesus is not just saying this about the argumentative teachers of the law who had probably reveled in the disciples' failure to drive out this demon and were arguing whether they were ever qualified for drive out demons. He's not just saying it of the crowd at large, the onlookers. He's not just saying this to the boy and his father as this boy most likely was an unbeliever to be possessed by an evil spirit and the father we know is struggling with his faith as he cried out to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (verse 24) Although meant for everyone there, Jesus' statement was a little more directed to his 9 disciples. Jesus is frustrated.

That stings. It stings that Jesus called 9 of his 12 disciples part of an unbelieving generation. At other times he would say that all 12 expressed little to no faith in him, that their hearts were hard. Jesus had been teaching them for over 2 years now. He had given them authority to drive out demons. Yet, this couldn't drive out this demon. When you look at the end of this section and the private conversation between Jesus and his disciples, asking why they couldn't, Jesus tells them that "This kind can come out only by prayer." (verse 29) Meaning that they had not sought the Lord in prayer. They had tried to drive this demon out on their authority, trusting in themselves, not God.

So, yes, Jesus was discouraged that they were not applying what they had learned from him, that they were not trusting in God's power to fix impossible situations. Would all of training and teaching come to nothing? This is Jesus' frustration.

But isn't being frustrated a sin? "How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (verse 19) That's pretty harsh, too harsh to be said to his disciples, right? Other people who didn't believe, sure, Jesus can be frustrated with them, but not his disciples, not his followers. That's just too mean.

There are right times to be angry and frustrated. It is right to be angry when someone sins against you or another person, when you see injustice, someone being wronged. There is a place to be rightly frustrated with someone when they know what is good and right and godly and they continue to not do it because it does make you feel like God's teaching, his influence, his Word, has come to nothing and had no effect.

While it's not wrong to be frustrated or angry in and of themselves, it is wrong to take anger or frustration and use it to hurt someone back, to belittle them, insult them. God doesn't do that in his anger or in his frustration, unlike us. We most likely can't recall a time when in anger or frustration that we didn't sin. But God isn't us, and we aren't God. God can and is rightly frustrated by our unbelief and still does not sin against us.

Now, the uncomfortable confrontation: Have we frustrated God, like the disciples did? Have there been promises of God that we have chucked aside not believing them and instead relied on ourselves? Have we heard that God will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear but we said, "No. This is too much. I can't take this temptation. I give up; I'm giving in."? Do I seek to solve the problems in this world and in my life by myself with my own talents and time and power and my thoughts and don't even think of asking God for help, not believing his promises to answer my prayers? Do I pray to God about an impossible situation only half-heartedly because I don't actually expect him to fix this, that I think prayer is kind of worthless and God won't do anything different? Do I not trust God? Am I one of the unbelieving generation that he is frustrated with because of the ways that I don't believe in him?

Maybe the reason why we think that Jesus' words of frustration have to be directed at someone else and can't be directed at his followers is because it makes us feel bad that Jesus might be frustrated with us. Maybe we are deflecting for the disciples because we really want to deflect this frustration over unbelief from ourselves. It hurts to think that Jesus, the all patient, all powerful God, can be frustrated with us because we don't take him at his Word, because we don't seek his help, because we want to determine how our lives should go, what will make us happy and fulfilled, and instead chuck Jesus and his Word to the side. So, we don't want it to be true that Jesus can be frustrated with his believers.

But what does Jesus do in his frustration? He helps us. He is even more patient with us. He offers his help for this impossible situation when he said, "Bring the boy to me." (verse 19) The father does. "When the spirit [in the boy] saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth." (verse 20) The frustrating unbelief of the father grew, but he still had faith enough to ask Jesus, "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." (verse 22b)

Jesus does not sin against the man or his boy or his disciples. He teaches. "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." (verse 23) And then he heals. Jesus rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. (verses 25-26) The boy was healed! Even in his righteous frustration, Jesus shows everyone that with God the impossible becomes possible. Trusting in God, we take out the word impossible and instead know and trust that all things are possible because we have an all powerful God who actually can change things.

God has done the impossible in our lives, maybe without us even seeing it. Demons are real beings, angels who rebelled against God, following Satan's lead. They're on this earth, waging war against us, wanting to destroy us like how they wanted to destroy this boy, wanting us to be lost to God by being part of the unbelieving generation. Maybe we see their work in the form of health afflictions, in temptations, in evil people doing evil things, all to get us to despair, to get us to give up on God, to no longer believe in him. But our God has done the impossible and conquered these evil spiritual forces. He has bound them in chains and limits them. He declared his victory over them when he rose from the dead and descended into hell. On the Last Day when Jesus returns, they will be locked away forever never to bother us again, their evil intentions thwarted for good, the battle already won for us.

Our all powerful God also did the impossible when he took us spiritually dead people, dead in our trespasses and sins, and made us alive. It is by grace you have been saved. He removed our sin by his death. He covered us with his perfection through his gift of baptism. He made us new and alive. He brought us from frustrating dead unbelief to faith in him. He has made us a temple of the Holy Spirit and dwells inside of us, not allowing any demon to come and take us over. We're protected. We're saved because God has done the impossible of bringing us from spiritual death to spiritual life and has driven unbelief from us. We are no longer that unbelieving generation.

But on this side of heaven, we still struggle like the father of the boy with our unbelief. So, we cry out to God for his help so that we don't frustrate him with our unbelief. We call out to God to help us fight the temptations that want to just give in and give up on God. We ask God to help us pray fully confident that he can change the impossible to possible. "Help me overcome my unbelief! Make the impossible possible!"

Our God does just that, like he did with this boy who was possessed by a demon. God has taken out the impossible. So we bring him the impossible problems we can't fix. We stop turning to ourselves and instead turn to him and believe that he can actually fix these things. Jesus, help us to believe as you have said: "Everything is possible for one who believes." (verse 23) Amen.