

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH**SERIES TITLE: MARK 9:14-29 | SERMON TITLE: THE POWER OF UNBELIEF****DAVE WAGNER**

What is the worst sin you've ever committed? Murder, rape, abortion? Maybe you've been guilty of gross indecency. Maybe you've directly blasphemed God.

Let me put it another way: What is the *most powerful* sin you've ever committed? Of all your sins, which sin has greatest power to destroy your life and the lives of others? If we ask the Bible this question, I think the answer might surprise us.

With many others, I take unbelief to be the mother-sin, the sin of all sins, the archetypal or original sin. Unbelief is the mountain spring from which all rivers flow. It is unbelief which felled Adam and Eve, I hold. It is unbelief which is responsible for every instance of disobedience. Unbelief is the principle which has always marked out the Seed of the Serpent, the enemies of God.

But we don't always think about it this way. Our list of the worst sins surely includes the things I mentioned above; murder, abuse, genocide, abortion, perversion; but would we put unbelief on that list?

Brothers, my goal today is to persuade you to put unbelief on that list. Not only that; I want to make a modest effort to get you to put unbelief at the top of the list. I want to tell you unbelief is the mother-sin. Unbelief is the source from which all your other sins are flowing. I want to expose for you somewhat the Power of Unbelief.

What is Unbelief?

By "Unbelief" I refer to a culpable mistrust of God. Disbelieving God means thinking ill of his power, his goodness and his wisdom. Unbelief is a refusal to depend on God, a refusal to count on him to meet your needs. Unbelief is a low opinion of God in general, perhaps even a suspicion of God. Unbelief is critical of the purpose and actions of God; unbelief even accuses God of caring little for men, or possibly of desiring their harm.

Unbelief is a mockery of God. In fact when unbelief has run its course, we call such a man a " mocker" or a "scoffer." These are men whose unbelief has reached open scorn and hatred for

God. You may never have expressed open scorn for God but I want you to know that unbelief is the seed from which the tree of scorn grows, like anger is the seed which grows into the tree of murder. Even a little unbelief is a dangerous poison.

When unbelief is present we fear for the future, we grow bitter at people, bitter at circumstance, bitter at God for not arranging our lives differently. Unbelief causes hardness of heart, and grimness of demeanor. We feel that we can trust no one else to look after us and so we must look after ourselves. In unbelief men become sharp and suspicious with others. They are quick to threaten when they feel threatened; they are constantly making back-up plans in case worse comes to worst.

Unbelief leads to spiritual and physical weariness. The man can't rest because he can't trust. His lack of trust crushes his own heart and he learns to live with almost constant anxiety. He gets used to lying because he has to protect himself; there's no one else to protect him, after all; or so he believes.

Not just lying, but many sins arise from his unbelief because the man is like a cornered animal. He will do and say almost anything to get himself out of a tight spot. He can't imagine simply doing what's right and trusting God with the results.

And when he's not on the defense, the weariness from his unbelief leaves him wide open for temptations of the flesh. The man wants relief from constantly looking over his shoulder, from his continual, crushing loneliness. He mostly can't say No to the draw of quick and easy pleasure; food, sex, play; some or all of these command his obedience and he can't resist.

As a substitute for believing God's promises the man must set up for himself surrogate hopes. These are worldly hopes of achievement which the man uses to encourage himself and urge himself on when things get hard. "Don't worry," he tells himself, "keep on going and you'll get that raise, or that degree, or find the right woman, or finally save enough for that vacation." He sets up these surrogate hopes and then when the Futility of the Fall kicks in and his hopes crumble he is devastated.

His worldly hopes were built on sand; the sand shifted and his hopes collapsed. He has no transcendental hope to resort to so his whole world has come to nothing, for the time being. He'll set up a new surrogate hope tomorrow. Unbelief makes a man very brittle emotionally, whether he shows it or not. It also makes him the slave of circumstance. He is often crushed when things don't go his way.

Now my goal in saying all this is to illustrate unbelief, but also to point out the impressive Power of Unbelief. Unbelief can accomplish a lot. Rather, we should say unbelief can destroy a lot. I want to show you some of the Power of Unbelief from our text in Mark. Let's summarize the story.

Today's Story

Last time we saw Jesus revealing his End Times glory up in the hills, away from the crowd. When Jesus returns out of the hills he stumbles into a debate between his disciples and the scribes; the crowd is also present.

A man separates himself from the crowd and comes to Jesus. He tells Jesus how he brought his demonized son for healing but the disciples were unable to exorcise him. The demon makes the boy mute and throws him into dangerous seizures.

And now we see Jesus has had his fill of unbelief. He seems to be worn out with the unbelief of all those around him, including his disciples. Jesus implies he's tired of "putting up" with all of them!

They bring the boy and another demonic seizure starts. The father tells Jesus that the demon has often tried to kill the boy by throwing him into fire and water. Then the father makes the World-Class mistake of implying that Jesus may not be able to help the boy!

Jesus makes a point to attack the man's unbelieving remark. Jesus indicates the lack of ability is not in Jesus, but in the man because of his unbelief. We see that Jesus hit the mark when the man then cries out for Jesus not only to heal the boy's demonization, but also to heal the father's unbelief!

Then after a dramatic scene of exorcising the demon, Jesus retires with his disciples alone into a house. Naturally they want to know why, after former successes in exorcism, they failed on this occasion. Jesus' answer is that they had never encountered a demon of this sort before, and that only prayer to God could avail in this case. That's the story. Let's look now at four points on the Power of Unbelief.

1. Unbelief Makes Christians Powerless

The first point we can make from this story is that unbelief makes Christians powerless in ministry. The disciples have formerly had success in exorcism and yet this time they fail, and the reason is unbelief.

Now we don't get this as clearly in Mark, but in Matthew's account, Jesus tells his disciples they failed to exorcise the demon because their faith is small. In Mark's account Jesus speaks of the kind of demon and the need for prayer. It's possible to combine the two accounts in the following way:

Jesus said both of these things, effectively to say that in order to deal with a demon of greater power, such as the one in this story, they must have been trusting in God more fully than they were. If they had been trusting, it would have been indicated either by prayer in their exorcism, or by more prayer leading up to the exorcism. A lack of prayer is often a lack of faith; we don't pray because we don't think we need to; we are guilty of pride and self-reliance.

So, we know that unbelief is not just the problem of Jesus' generation, nor just of the demoniac's father, but of the apostles, too.

And their unbelief made their ministry powerless. These 12 men have been selected to advance the kingdom of God after Jesus' departure; that's going to require substantial power, since Satan is in possession of the world and he won't give up without a fight. For the 12 to practice unbelief is for them to unplug from the power source. No faith means no power; no power means no ministry success.

And nothing has changed. Our lack of trust in God will translate to powerless service to God. Have you ever felt frustrated that when you share the Gospel there is no power attendant? How about unbelief as an explanation? Has it ever seemed like your efforts to serve the church, whether in speaking or service or whatever, are simply not blessed? Maybe it's because of the smallness of your faith.

Unbelief has the power to make hundreds of hours of ministry totally vain and empty. Unbelief castrates our ministry efforts. We don't trust God and so the demon won't come out. The people aren't helped, God's kingdom isn't advanced, and we are helpless before the power of Satan.

Now without establishing a metric here, I believe that churches should be fruitful. Churches should not go on year after year without seeing any conversions, baptisms, and spiritual breakthroughs. I think these things should be reasonably, fairly regular under normal circumstances. And so every church has to ask itself whether it is enjoying ministry success. I don't mean we start worshipping the numbers; but I do mean we have reasonable, biblical expectations about God working among us to bear fruit.

And in this respect, we have to know that unbelief will kill our ministry efforts. That's our first point about the Power of Unbelief.

2. Unbelief Wears God Out

The second point is that unbelief has the power to wear God out! And that's saying something, since God is eternal, infinite and omnipotent. How exactly do you wear out a Being who has limitless energy and power?

I'll tell you how: Keep distrusting Him! Refuse to depend on him. Be independent; be self-dependent. That makes God weary! Jesus actually asks how much longer he will be forced to put up with all those unbelievers!

I want you to think of someone you constantly have to put up with. A coworker, a family member. Think of someone who tries your patience; they wear you out. Dealing with them is hard work. They set you on edge. They get on your nerves. They make you want to forget you're a Christian for a few minutes so you can tell them what you think of them. Do you know someone like that?

Brothers, that's how God feels about unbelief! God is omnipotent and he can endure a lot, but he draws the line at unbelief! Unbelief is something God has to put up with; it gets on his nerves. It makes him weary!

Now you have to grant that's pretty impressive. A force in the universe which has the power to wear God out. That's the Power of Unbelief.

3. Unbelief Cuts Us Off From Divine Blessings

The third point is that unbelief has the power to cut us off from divine blessing. The father in our story was guilty of not trusting God with his demonized boy. And that distrust of God was part of why the disciples failed.

So what if the father had great faith? Would that have sufficed to get the demon out the first time? Maybe. We know for a fact unbelief hindered Jesus' ministry at Nazareth. Mark says he could do no mighty work there because of their unbelief. Or think of Paul in Acts 14; Paul sees that a certain crippled man has faith to be healed. So Paul heals him.

Or think of king Ahaz. God promises to destroy his enemies who are conspiring against him. But God warns Ahaz that if he will not believe then he will not be established.

The point is that unbelief has power to block divine blessing from coming our way. Is this because God is bound by creaturely unbelief? Of course not. God is powerful to do what he pleases irrespective of human belief or unbelief. But God has chosen to bless men who believe and to curse men who don't. That's standard operating procedure for God.

And I'm talking about divine blessing for ongoing redemption from Satan and sin. The father's unbelief kept his boy locked in Satanic possession. Parents: How many times do you think your children have suffered for your unbelief?! How many more times will they?! I'm a parent and I know the heart of a parent. I know every halfway decent parent would rather die than do harm to their children. Isn't that reason enough for us to abandon unbelief?

What if God desires to give you more spiritual blessing than you already have? But what if your unbelief is preventing it? What if God wants you to experience more freedom from sin, more power over the devil, but you insist on self-dependence; you refuse to place your confidence in God without reservation? What a shame to end up with less than God has for us because we simply will not believe.

Isn't it sad to think of a Christian, a beloved child of God who has access to eternal riches in God right this moment, but they're living on a tenth of their inheritance because they won't rest fully in God? Can you imagine the son of a king who is malnourished while living in the palace? The finest delicacies are his any time of the day but he insists on relying on himself and so he mostly goes hungry. That's you, Christian, when you starve yourself through unbelief.

4. Unbelief Succeeds in Slandering God

Now here's our fourth and last point about the Power of Unbelief. Unbelief is masterful at shifting the blame onto God. When the father talks to Jesus he implies that the insufficiency is in Jesus; "If You Can," the father says.

Jesus won't have that for a moment. He turns it around on the man: "If you can?! No, if You Can!" This situation is not a result of a lack in Jesus; it's a result of a lack in the man's faith. This father doesn't trust God. And his unbelief doesn't stop there; it moves on to shift the blame to Jesus as if he were at fault.

Unbelief is really a marvelous slander of God. Every soul with access to the Scriptures certainly has no excuse for not trusting God with body and soul. If the Bible teaches anything it teaches God is supremely powerful, wise and good. But if that's what God is like unbelief has ceased to be

a reasonable option. It's comic that unbelief succeeds in cutting us off from God's power and blaming God for lack of power in the very same moment! Behold the cunning Power of Unbelief!

But let's make this personal. Do you understand that when you withhold your complete trust from God, even a little, you are guilty of serious slander? Your unbelief is blame-shifting. We are the ones who have done wrong and brought evil on ourselves and others. After doing so we have the nerve in our unbelief to accuse God of the wrong.

Someone will object, "But Dave, I'm not accusing God of anything. I just have a hard time trusting him completely, that's all." You are accusing him, even if only by implication. Remember the father in our story? He disguised his unbelief in what seemed to be a humble request for help. It was actually a backhanded request; it was a request which stunk of disrespect and disregard for Jesus Christ.

So, No, you are not justified, not even in a little unbelief. There is zero excuse for withholding the least iota of confidence from God. That's because he's worthy of it all, whatever devils and crooked men may say.

So understand for certain that if you allow unbelief in your heart you are blaspheming the majesty of God's power, wisdom, and goodness. Unbelief is cunning, and effective, and powerful.

What is the Solution?

Well, unbelief is powerful. It makes us powerless in ministry; it wears God out; it blocks divine blessings; it blasphemes God. What is the solution?

The solution is always faith in Christ. Unbelief is a substantial sin, a sin for which men deserve eternal hell. Every instance of unbelief has power to condemn us before God.

Christ, on the other hand, never disbelieved God. Every moment of his life he walked with God in pleasing faith. He always trusted the father; he always approached life with confidence in God. Even when he was being falsely accused and condemned to execution he entrusted himself to God as the one who judges justly.

Not the least bit of unbelief was ever found in Christ. For this reason he is the only righteous person who ever lived. And he is the only source of righteousness you are ever going to find.

What is the solution? Confess your sin of unbelief to God. Ask for forgiveness. Set yourself to deny unbelief in future and to practice faith the best you can. And through it all rest your heart

fully in God. Know that whoever believes will not be condemned, but is clothed with the righteousness of Christ, and so is fully accepted with God, not someday in the future, but this very moment.

Repent your unbelief. And then be assured you have forgiveness for the sin of unbelief.