



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 21SR PENTECOST

OCTOBER 17, 2021

MARK 10:23-31 AND ECCLESIASTES 5:10-20

“WE BELIEVE...HELP THOU OUR UNBELIEF”

Mark 9:14-32 describes an encounter between our Lord had with a man whose son “*was possessed by a spirit*” that robbed him of his speech, threw him into seizures and became life threatening. The desperate man, who no doubt considered his son his most prized possession – begged Jesus to heal him. “*If you can do anything...help us*” he said, not a resounding confession of faith, but given the circumstances perhaps it was all he could muster.

“*All things are possible for him who believes*” Jesus said. The man then made what might be called another confession – “*I do believe...help me overcome my unbelief.*” If you excuse me, I don’t think a human can do much better than that. The stories that proceed from this in Mark 9 and 10 all concern one form of unbelief or another – pride, hardness of heart, envy, and in the story of a rich man, started last week and concluded today, expressed as his ‘*belief in his belief*’, and likely what he and others assumed was confirmation of his belief – his wealth.

Unlike the man whose son was possessed, the man of many possessions expresses confidence of the like we rarely find in the gospels. “*All the commands I have kept since my youth*” he boasted...believing mightily in his belief. Which is actually another form of unbelief...another form of “*spirit possession*” but more subtle – not throwing us to the ground and convulsing us but lulling us to spiritual sleep confident all is well because, in life... for us at least...all is well. Take your pick...either form of possession can kill us.

It may seem strange to us that today’s story is like unto the former – the former being a head on collision between Jesus and a spirit - indeed even “*the evil one.*” But the evil one is nothing if not adaptable, and so, he adapts his approach in and through another man by convincing him he has (or can get) something on his own merits – eternal life. So prompted the man questions Jesus (a lot of sin happens in the Bible when we question what God said) – “*so it’s belief you want...all things possible for those who believe eh...then get a load of me and tell me, what more do I need?*” Need we say more?

The presenting issue in our story is wealth – but as we’ve said the presenting issue in Mark 9 and 10 changes a lot. Ecclesiastes is blunt – wealth can deceive. Imagine a King named Solomon writing something that! Jesus is all over the wisdom of Solomon when he says “*how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.*” This introduces nothing new so far as Biblical wisdom or the faith of Israel is concerned, despite the apparent incredulity of those who heard it.

Wealth’s problem – and everything in and about this life has a problem of one sort or another, is that it not only divides our loyalties, but it alters our memory. We forget that we’ve come from God and are going to God, and that we and all that we have are God’s! In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther, in his explanation of the Apostle’s Creed, walks us through what it is we believe when we say, “*I believe.*” When we say “*I believe in God*”...Luther says we confess that we believe God has created us and all that exists, given and still preserves our bodies and souls with all their powers, and provides us with everything needed for this life...all of it out of divine goodness and mercy. Therefore, Luther says “*we surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.*” In saying “*We believe in Jesus Christ*”, Luther says we believe that Jesus has redeemed us from sin at great cost with his holy and precious blood...all this he did so that we may be his own and live under him in his kingdom, a serving that is a form of blessedness.

But in saying “I believe in the Holy Spirit”, Luther insists upon belief in our “unbelief.” *“I believe that I cannot”* Luther wrote *“believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him...but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel.”* The gospel brought you to Jesus. We Lutherans place great emphasis – you might say we place darn near everything on John 15:16, where our Lord says *“you did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”* The man in our story believed he’d already attained the fruit by way of the law, by way of a life in his mind so obviously blessed that he needed only to verify this goodness, and that is precisely the deception that Jesus bursts but good.

Yes, folks with the world’s goods have much to offer, but it may be that they have significant obstacles in their way – Ecclesiastes 5 more than strongly hints that wealth can harm its holder. What harm – well if only that the gospel has a harder time getting them to believe a person’s real wealth is Jesus, then harm enough. But we all have a hard time believing that – that is why we can’t have faith in our faith and belief in our belief but must believe in the word of Christ.

And what Jesus has said is that in Him, “all things are possible.” He said it to a man whose son the devil claimed as his possession – plundering Satan of that delusion, and he said it to a man whose possessions were very possibly his demon, together with his faith in his faith, plundering him no less of his delusion. Pastor Jared Wilson, who teaches at Midwest Baptist Theological Seminary and is a contributing writer to the journal “Christianity Today”, wrote *“it is one thing to think of riches and material possessions as God’s blessings (our Lutheran confession of faith in fact states that they are). It’s another thing entirely to think of them as God’s debt to our faithfulness (or to consider the lack thereof as an indicator of unfaithfulness).”*

G.K Chesterton, one of my favorite authors, once said *“there is no sense in not appreciating things. But there is no point in having more of them if you have less appreciation of them.”* He understood Ecclesiastes...and Mark, quite well. 6th century Pope Gregory the Great said *“let temporal possessions be what you use, eternal things what you desire.”*

Jesus your Savior, the King of the kingdom which is yours by grace through faith, who *“at great cost redeemed you, a lost and condemned person”*, tilts our thinking and our believing in an entirely different direction than this world does. Free of anxiety about our future, we are full of opportunity in the present to run to any opportunity we find to *“thank, praise, serve and obey him.”* Faith follows Jesus to the cross – gratitude and a generous spirit follow faith from the cross – eager to do what our forgiver has shown us is now possible for those who’ve been there. AMEN