

"I Believe; Help My Unbelief!"

(Mark 9:23-24)

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13th, 2015

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. So I know that Jesus is exceptional, especially in regard to his reputation and following, but – and let's be honest, can I really trust him? Can I trust Jesus Christ? And perhaps it is not so much a question as to whether or not I can trust Jesus, but can I trust his followers and what they have said about him? There are – after all – religious fanatics out there and many of them while having the best of intentions are just misguided and have forsaken reasonable faculty. So who can I trust? Can I really trust Jesus? Can I really trust his followers?

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was a renowned intellectual and he was an atheist. He wrote specifically, however, against Christianity. His book entitled "Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays" (1957) lists several arguments against theism in general and Christianity in particular. One of his climactic arguments against the Christian faith was to examine and scrutinize the character of Jesus Himself. Can you trust Jesus? According to Russell, if you do, then you're foolish, because His teaching is untenable. Here are three choice examples put forth by Russell:

1. *Jesus taught "Resist not evil" which Russell points out was not a novel teaching but that Jesus' followers have a long history of not following this instruction...didn't Jesus know that his teaching was unsustainable?*
2. *Jesus taught "Judge not lest you be judged," but his followers have always practiced judgment...again, what kind of leader was Christ?*
3. *Jesus taught "Be perfect," and here we see the complete and utter inability of his followers to do any such thing. Again, what kind of a leader was Christ?*

Russell at first glance commands intellectual rigor and respect, but the startling reality is that he didn't know what he was talking about. The situation was just embarrassing. In each of the three examples I just gave you – in every instance – Russell evaluated Jesus Christ based on misinterpretations of Jesus' words, and yet Russell gave countless numbers of people the impression that Jesus should be discredited and that his character was suspect. Note specifically:

1. When the LORD of glory taught "resist not evil" he did not mean "do not defend yourself" as Russell implies, but he meant "do not take vengeance." Two different meanings.

2. When the LORD of glory taught “do not judge” he did not mean do not discern between good and evil (while taking appropriate action), but he meant “do not condemn” or pronounce damnation over others. Two very different meanings.
3. When the LORD of glory taught “be perfect” he did not mean moral or behavioral perfectionism, but taught his followers to love all people (to be “complete” or consistent in their treatment to people). Two completely divergent meanings.

Now we will not make a logical error of our own by suggesting that with these corrections, Jesus’ followers have kept *these* instructions as well as they should have, but what does this say of the LORD? The LORD of glory calls this failure what it is: sin...sin against Himself, sin against other people; and sin against self when we ourselves fall short of His teaching, but what all of these clarifications have in common is this:

1. They demonstrate that those who discredit Christ and try to give reason not to trust Him often misrepresent Him. In this way the eternal destiny of souls are impacted by deceiving strawman arguments and deceptive misinterpretations which people assume to be true.
2. The actual interpretations are all within the actual ability of people who are born-again by the Holy Spirit. It is not impossible that a forgiven Christian can – by the grace of God – choose not to retaliate; avoid condemnation towards others, and strive to be complete in how they treat others: feeding the hungry unbeliever for example as much as the hungry believer.
3. To realize that in treating the Words of Jesus in the right and proper way, we do not make trusting Jesus unwise, but quite to the contrary, demonstrate compelling reason as to why we should in fact trust Jesus after-all.

Today’s gospel in Mark 9 is teaching that we must completely answer this question – and do so responsibly and rightly before we die – “Can I trust Jesus?” Too often it is assumed that the burden of proof for arriving to an answer rests on Christians, but there is substantial burden that rests on those who say you can’t trust Jesus. Those who reject that Christ is the Son of God, true God of true God, Savior of sinners, the Resurrection and the Life, if they are going to reject the resurrection of Jesus, must give an alternative explanation for what happened in history.

Something astounding happened, a veritable Cambrian explosion in recorded history. The Greco-Roman world was entrenched in the philosophical underpinning that the soul is superior to the body...the thought that it would be desirable to RETURN to the body in a resurrection was ludicrous. The point is that there was no predisposition in the Greco-Romans to believe in a bunch of Jews claiming that Jesus rose from the grave. In the meanwhile, the Jews were the predominantly tolerated and established religion in the empire, and they too had contrarian views to the claim that Jesus was Messiah and was resurrected. While they

believed in resurrection in general, it was untenable to accept a singular resurrection without the ushering of the full kingdom of God and the universal resurrection. How dare one claim that God's kingdom had come through this one resurrection of Jesus while there is still so much suffering, misery, and sin in the world?! One cannot say therefore that the Jews had any predisposition to accept the disciples preaching that Jesus rose.

But there's more to consider: The historical record of the 1st –century spread of the news that Jesus rose from the dead is not confined to Christian history. Jewish historians – like Josephus – and Greco-Roman historians -- like Tacitus and Pliny -- also record the proliferation of the assertion that Jesus rose from the dead. This is not merely Christian history, this is universal history.

And even more importantly, we know that this proclamation of the resurrection was EARLY, proclaimed during the lifetimes of those who would either confirm His rising or be in a position to dispute the claim...there was no time for myth to develop. In this real-time, current-generation reporting, it was and is universally acknowledged furthermore that the tomb of Jesus became vacant. He was buried and long before the possibility of any decomposition in an extremely secured tomb, his body was gone. This is known. This is history. What you have left is this: if his body was taken by those against the teaching of Christ, then his dead body would have been produced to stamp out delusion; but if the body was taken by those who followed Him, then they collectively lied to the extent that they were willing to be martyred for their deception, one which logically no one was going to accept anyway.

But in the face of all of these historical facts, it is also known that Christianity exploded upon the world and to this day – yes even in this post-modern, technologically-advanced day and age – is the largest world religion on the planet. How do we explain this?

1. The Greco-Romans would have naturally rejected the claim.
2. The Jews would have naturally rejected the claim.
3. The reporting was recorded history in universal scope.
4. The reporting was within the same generation of the events themselves.
5. Enemies would have no compulsion to permit any deception.
6. Advocates would have no ambition to be martyred for a lie that logically the culture was set up to reject.

And yet Christianity exploded upon the world.

This must be accounted for.

There is of course one tenable explanation: Jesus

actually rose from the dead. What is really left in the arsenal of the skeptics is this last, dying claim: “miracles are impossible.” This is a philosophical assumption and essentially maintains the thought that all events which occur in history *must* have a naturalistic explanation. But why should this be true? This position takes on all of the contours of popularized religion. The very claim that all that is real *must* be based on atomic particles cannot be proven, so why would anyone choose to be religious about it? (see Keller’s elegant chapter on the resurrection in his book *The Reason For God*)

But there is an answer to this and our gospel in Mark 9 speaks to it:

The father of the demon-possessed boy had reason to be shaky towards trusting Jesus. He had gone to Jesus’ disciples asking for their help to heal his son. They were unable to help the boy. So the father goes to Christ, but his words betray doubt (Mark 9:22b):

“But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” (emphasis mine)

Jesus in all compassion does not only desire to help the boy, but He desired to help the father and his lack of trust. So the LORD repeats the father’s words of doubt back to Him at verse 23: ***“And Jesus said to him, ‘If you can!’”***

The Lord is pointing out something that goes to our basic human nature: we just don’t trust God. We are rebels who want to call the shots. We reject God’s authority so that we can be our own authorities. It is the safest position we know. But the astounding truth is that this father’s doubt would not cancel Jesus’ authority, love, and compassion. In the face of the doubts...in the face of prayer interfered with by doubts, Jesus lovingly confronts the man. This is a wonderful summary from a faithful expositor:

“Now the father appeals to Christ: Give us help and have mercy upon us! This was a sincere prayer, but unfortunately he modified it by saying: If Thou art in any way able. Here unbelief was battling with belief; he was not quite certain in his trust in Jesus. He implied some doubt as to His ability to help in this severe case of need. Jesus therefore takes time to correct this feeling, using, in a reproving way, almost the same words that the man had used towards Him: If thou only wert able. Here is the difficulty, the grievous mistake; there is still doubt in your heart.” (Kretzmann, 215)

Yes, and this is what we are called to confess this day: our hearts are full of doubts. We are doubters, because we are sinners. We doubt all of the time, but Jesus in love was correcting the man. He is giving him and us a head’s up: “check your doubt.” “I’ve conquered death, trust me!” I am here elaborating, but let me state exactly what Jesus said (Mark 9:23b):

“All things are possible for one who believes.”

Again, the faithful expositor explains: "It is a favorite reference of Jesus that He here employs: All things are possible to him that believes. True faith has miraculous, heaven-storming qualities, Matt. 17:20; Phil. 4:13. This word had the desired effect with the distraught father. It opened his eyes to his lack of faith. In deep humility he cries out: I believe; come to the assistance of my unbelief. As in the heart of all Christians, belief and unbelief were battling in his heart. But now faith and trust in the Lord were supreme. He trusts entirely in the help of Christ, also against that evil of unbelief that thrusts its head up now and then in his heart." (Kretzmann, 215)

This loving correction from the Lord led the man to confess his doubt and to punctuate faith and I believe these are among the most important words in all the New Testament (while only occurring in Mark's gospel) as they comfort you and me because we also continue to battle sinful doubt (vs. 24):

"Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"

The father saw his duplicity and is an example to us. He cries out, "I do believe!" And then he cries out again: "Be helping – [continuously, every day of my life] – my unbelief!" The father became a great theologian: he saw his two ways, his two natures, and his two tendencies. But in this instance he was crucifying his unbelief, giving it to Jesus to take away and resting finally upon faith in Jesus Christ.

And yes as we have reviewed, it is a faith that is intellectually compelling and rigorous, but it is a faith that is greater than mere intellect. Faith realizes the foundation of the risen Christ and then it takes the next step: it trusts in Jesus who conquered death (making the outcome of our death to be with God and not apart from Him when we die). Barth quotes Luther and it is an astounding quote about faith that I had never seen before:

"Faith is such that it feeleth not but droppeth reason, shutteth the eyes and simply surrendereth to the Word, and followeth the same through death and life. But feeling goeth not beyond what can be grasped by reason and the senses, as what is heard, seen and felt, or known by the outward senses. Therefore feeling is counter to faith, faith to feeling...Whoso then pursueth feeling, he is destroyed, but whoso counter to feeling dependeth heartily upon the Word, he will be brought through." (Sommerpostille, 1526, Sermon on Mk. 16:1f, W.A....p. 222...p. 223) [Barth quotes Luther, I 1: 221, *Church Dogmatics*]

At the end of the day, the father – who had finally come to a desperate place in his life, that is, had to come to a place to see his inability and helplessness apart from God – cried out and arrived to faith. He would no longer solely rely on reason and what he saw, but he would go beyond it and trust in Jesus. To see this as the fuller arena of faith is comforting beyond

words: ***the Lord of mercy does not hold your struggle against you and the Lord treats you – even if you believe your faith to be very weak – to be His faithful child.*** You confess your unbelief and give it to Him and by His grace, you trust in Him! The struggle is not a bad thing, but much to the contrary, it is evidence that the Holy Spirit is truly working in you.

I conclude with these words from our Confessions also in reference to our reception of the body and blood of Christ:

“True and worthy communicants, on the other hand, are those timid, perturbed Christians, weak in faith, who are heartily terrified because of their many and great sins, who consider themselves unworthy of this noble treasure and the benefits of Christ because of their great impurity, and who perceive their weakness in faith, deplore it, and heartily wish that they might serve God with a stronger and more cheerful faith and a purer conscience. This most venerable sacrament was instituted and ordained primarily for communicants like this, as Christ says, ‘Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ (Matt. 11:28). Likewise, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.’ Likewise, ‘The power of God is made perfect in weakness.’ [II Cor. 12:9] Likewise, ‘As for a man who is weak in faith, welcome him, for God has welcomed him (Rom. 14:1,3). For whoever believes on the Son of God, be his faith strong or weak, has eternal life (John 3:16). And worthiness does not consist in the weakness or certainty of faith, be it greater or smaller, but solely in the merits of Christ, of which the distressed father of weak faith (Mark 9:24) partook no less than Abraham, Paul, and others who had a cheerful and strong faith.” (SD Article 7, Tappert, 582)