



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January 29, 2017

# Help My Unbelief

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

# **Help My Unbelief**

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2017 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: February 3, 2017

*Jesus said to him, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)*

As our story opens today, Jesus has just been transfigured, but only his inner circle—Peter, James, and John—have seen it. A little while ago, up on a mountain, Jesus’ clothes turned a dazzling white, and two figures appeared with him, Moses and Elijah, symbolizing all the law and the prophets. In the middle of this vision the disciples heard something like a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him!”

The experience was over in a moment or two, but when they came down off the mountain these young men knew that the one they were following was like nobody else in the world. He told them not to tell anyone what they had seen, so they kept it to themselves for the time being. But from now on they would watch what Jesus did and listen to what he said in a whole new way. Until now, they admired him. They were impressed by the things he said and did, but they had no idea who he really was. Now their belief, their faith in him, grew more real and more powerful than it had ever been before.

When they caught up with the other disciples, a crowd had already gathered around them. Some of the scribes, the interpreters of the law, were arguing with the disciples. Most of the crowd just wanted to catch a glimpse of Jesus. A few of them had serious problems and were hoping maybe Jesus could help.

Now a man in the crowd comes forward, and he tells the rabbi about his son. The boy has this spirit that seems to control him. He can't talk, and sometimes the spirit throws him down on the ground, foaming at the mouth and grinding his teeth and stiffening up like a board. Maybe the boy has what we would call epilepsy or seizures, or maybe it's something more than that. Whatever it is, the man says he asked Jesus' disciples to help, but they weren't able to do anything.

Jesus says, to no one in particular, "You faithless generation! How much longer do I have to put up with you?" That sounds harsh to those of us who expect Jesus to be infinitely patient, never put off by how slow we are to believe in him and trust what he has to say. But from the perspective of heaven, where the presence and power of Christ are seen in all of his glory, we worldlings must seem terribly slow to catch on.

"Bring the boy to me," Jesus says. So the father brings his son before the Son of God, though he doesn't know that yet. Mark says that as soon as the spirit sees Jesus, he throws the boy to the ground again, convulsing and rolling around, a terrible sight for the crowd to watch.

"How long has this been happening?" Jesus asks, like a good physician taking a patient's history. "Since childhood," the father answers, and you can hear the pain in his voice—the pain of a parent who's done all he can but still has not been able to heal his child. "Sometimes the spirit casts my boy into a fire, or throws him in the water, as though it's trying to kill him. If you're able to do anything, please have pity on us and help us."

“If you’re able!” Jesus says. “All things can be done for the one who believes.” And to that, the father cries out immediately, desperately: “I believe; help my unbelief!”

That’s where so many of us are, isn’t it? We believe, more or less. We believe in Jesus somehow, or we wouldn’t be here in the crowd that’s gathered around him. We believe, and yet we don’t quite believe. We want to believe. We want to have faith. We want to trust in him, because faith means trusting in God, trusting Jesus to be like God moving among us. We want to believe, but we need help to do that. So this poor father, pleading for his son, and for himself, and for all of us, cries out: “I believe; help my unbelief!”

Jesus understands. He knows it’s hard for us, even though it’s hard for him too. It’s hard for him to see us suffer, like it’s hard for the father to watch his boy suffering. And it’s hard for Jesus to see how slow we are to recognize what he himself sees so clearly. The Lord has to do spectacular things once in a while so that we’ll learn to trust him in ordinary things. He knows we have short attention spans, and short memories, so he keeps sending us signs to convince us that what he says is true: “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” Jesus has to help our unbelief. He has to love us into loving him, and trusting him.

So Jesus turns to the boy, and he says to the spirit that’s been oppressing him all his life: “You, I command you to come out, and never bother him again!” The spirit gives the boy one last great convulsion, and then it departs, leaving the child so still on the ground that most of the crowd think he’s dead. But Jesus takes him by the hand and lifts him up, and soon the boy is standing all by himself.

Now it's the father who cannot speak, but only because his joy is too great for words. His belief is inexpressible, but his unbelief is gone. He and his family will trust in Jesus from now on, for as long as any of them will live.

In a little while Jesus and his disciples slip away to somebody's house. In the privacy of the home, far from the maddening crowd, they ask their master, "Why couldn't we do that?" And he answers, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

It's a striking thing to say. Apparently there are degrees of discipleship, and different levels of faith are able to do different things. Ordinary disciples can do lots of things for Jesus and his kingdom. We can lead worship and Bible studies, teach Sunday school, and form small groups. We can visit people at home, and take them supper when they can't cook for themselves. We can show up to help at the food bank or World Vision. We can build schools in Haiti and support our friends in Homewood and the Hill District. We can do all sorts of things that church folk do—things that are good and worthwhile, and witness to the love and grace and goodness of God.

But some things—casting out the spirits that plague people's souls, or healing what's broken inside us and between us—some things can be done only through prayer. And the kind of prayer Jesus is talking about here is not just the kind you use when you open a meeting at church, or say grace before meals, or even the kind you say together in worship where the words are printed in the bulletin.

The kind of prayer Jesus means here comes when your whole heart and soul are devoted to God, learning to listen for God's word, and knowing how to recognizing it when you hear it. This kind of prayer requires discernment, where we tune our will to God's will instead of trying to bend God's will to our own. This kind of prayer wants to make us an instrument for whatever God would have us do. It lets God's power flow through us for the purposes of God, rather than trying to harness the power of God for our own agenda.

When we learn to pray like that, when our whole lives in fact become a kind of prayer, then once in a while something like a miracle happens. But for the most part, we just learn to trust in God. Then, little by little, unbelief gives way to belief, and we simply live in the faith and hope and love that come from knowing God.

The psalmist says, "Do not put your trust in princes." Even the rulers of this world can do only so much, for better or for worse. Therefore, the Bible says, we should neither put too much faith in them nor fall into despair when they fail to do what they should. We need to look beyond the powers and principalities of this world to the God who made us all, and to whom all of us, princes and ordinary people alike, are always accountable.

Those of us who would be faithful need to recognize the signs of God's presence among us, and pray to become part of God's redeeming work in the world. The psalmist says that the Lord executes justice for the oppressed. He gives food to the hungry and sets the prisoners free. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind, sometimes physically but more often spiritually. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. He watches over the strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow.



And for the most part, God does these things through us—through the kinds of disciples who pray to know God, and do God’s will, and become instruments of God’s reconciling peace. Then the very act of living for God helps our unbelief, and spiritual dryness finds springs in the dessert to renew our souls. Our faith grows deeper when we see God at work in the world, and often we see God’s work most clearly when we ourselves become a part of it.

If you believe, but need help with your unbelief, ask God to help, because God wants nothing more than for people to grow in faithfulness. Ask God to lead you to places where your faith can grow. When you do that, you’ll be surprised to see how Jesus will show up in all sorts of ways that you might never have imagined.

Then, the more you see Jesus working in and through the people around you, and in and through yourself, the more you will believe, and the stronger your spirit will grow. “To those who have, more will be given,” Jesus says. He’s not talking about anything as trivial as accumulating what the world calls wealth. Jesus means that the gifts of the Spirit multiply, and the more we want what God wants, the more the deepest longings of our hearts will be satisfied.

So pray sincerely to God, “I believe; help my unbelief.” Then watch and see what happens.



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630

**[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)**