

## "WHERE THE DISCIPLES LOST OUT!"

TEXT: "IF YOU CAN! WHY ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE TO HIM WHO BELIEVES"  
(MARK 9:23)

INTRODUCTION I think that one of the most difficult things in the world is to see someone else do successfully something you have tried to do and failed to do. For instance, I imagine it's very disconcerting to a doctor to see another doctor cure a patient whom he has tried to cure, but failed to cure. And by the same token, I imagine it's not easy for a man in business to see another man take a business and make a great success out of it when in his hands and under his leadership it failed completely.

This was the kind of experience the disciples once had when a man in trouble came to see them. This man had a son, probably in his teens, who was an epileptic. As the boy grew older, the convulsions and seizures became much more severe; in fact, they were so severe that on one occasion the boy was almost thrown into a fire and killed. And on another occasion, a convulsion almost caused him to drown. Now the father of the boy, like most of the people of that time, believed that the disease was caused by demonic possession. He believed that every time his son had a convulsion a devil entered into the body of the boy, taking possession of him and throwing him to the ground and making him writhe in agony. He believed of course that the only way to get rid of the disease was to drive the devil out. (I think we can easily understand this explanation of the disease if we look only at the appearances of it, and as we watch explanations come and go in medical history, this may be as good as some of the others that have been offered.)

The boy's father had heard that Jesus was able to drive out a devil, and not only this, but that Jesus was doing this repeatedly throughout the different towns of Galilee, and so, as a last resort, and in that desperate state of mind that some of you may have been in at different times in your lives, he took his son to see Jesus. When he came to the town where Jesus was reported to be, he found to his great disappointment that Jesus was not there. - The man had also heard that Jesus had given this strange power to cast out demons to his associates, that is to his disciples. He noticed that some of the disciples were in the town, and so he went to them immediately and asked them to help him. They tried, and they failed. When they found that they couldn't heal the boy, they started to discuss the case among themselves. In the midst of their discussion, Jesus returned. The father, of course, went immediately to Jesus and asked for help. Jesus cast out the devil and the boy was cured!

When the disciples were along with Jesus, the first question they asked him of course, was, "Why couldn't we do it?" "Why couldn't we cast out this devil?" The answer that Jesus gave them was very direct and very simple. He said, "Nothing can drive out this kind of thing except prayer." I think it goes without saying that Jesus here is not thinking about prayer as some kind of perfunctory petition that a person might make at a given time. He was not saying that the disciples did not have the influence with God that someone else might have had. Rather, I think he was talking about prayer as a source of spiritual power. Undoubtedly, he was thinking of prayer as he must have practiced it when he spent whole nights in prayer - a perfect community of spirit between God and man,

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so that man is fortified, sustained, and strengthened by the very life of God himself!

Jesus did not say to his disciples, and this I think is one of the interesting things to note, he didn't say, "You couldn't do this because you are not the Son of God as I am". He didn't imply this. Rather, I think, his answer implies that they had every right to expect to be able to do this. His answer implies that he would have liked to have had them do this, and was disappointed when they couldn't. What he said to them, if we translate this into plain English and read between the lines was something like this:

"You weren't able to do this simply because you didn't have the spiritual power to do it. The mastery of the physical and the material by the mind and the spirit takes a spiritual power that you do not have!"

I've often thought that this must have been one of the low points in the careers of these disciples, one of the few times when they fell down and lost out!

RELATING THE THEME TO THE PRESENT TIME.....

Now I wonder if you have the same feeling that I have that Jesus, as is so often the case, but even more especially right here, is

speaking directly to us. Our world is literally torn and twisted by devils that we cannot manage and drive out. Beginning right in our homes, parents are finding it difficult to manage their own children, and husbands and wives, more often than we'd like to admit, are finding it difficult to get along with each other. The teen-agers in our country today are out of hand. People by the thousands have been caught up in the shallow currents of materialism. Men in business are the slaves of great organizations, and are moved about like pawns on a board. Automobiles are larger and larger, even though we do not need larger automobiles, because if they're not larger people won't buy them, and if people won't buy them, our entire economic system is likely to collapse. Weapons of war are deadlier and deadlier because if we don't keep up the with the weapons of enemy countries, the whole world will blow apart.

To be sure there are other devils that have taken possession of our society, and perhaps you wonder as so many other others often wonder, why can't we do something and drive these devils right out of our society. Why can't we, with all of our resources, and generations of Christian history and practice behind us, why can't we drive these devils out, not only out of our personal lives, but out of the life of the world in general. I'm afraid that the answer to this question is just about the same answer that Jesus gave to his disciples. We simply do not have the spiritual power to do it. We're spiritually exhausted, not as individuals, to be sure, not everyone, that is. But as a people, as a nation, we've been living on and spending the capital of our Puritan forefathers, and we've failed to put much bank in the bank. And so we face the demons and the devils of our modern day world without the spiritual power and energy that is so necessary if we want to drive them out.

THE SECRET OF SPIRITUAL POWER

The secret of spiritual power, as is true of every other secret as far as

Christians are concerned, is to be found in Jesus. Perhaps we can find one or two clues to this secret of spiritual power in ourselves if we examine more closely what Jesus did on this particular occasion.

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The first thing that catches my attention is that the man with the boy was looking for Jesus, and that he didn't find Jesus immediately simply because he wasn't there. You may wonder where Jesus was. According to St. Mark's account, we find that he had withdrawn from his active life and ministry with three of his very close friends into the hills in order to be alone. He was with his friends part of the time, and part of the time he was by himself, apart from the world and all of the demands that it made upon him. I think he realized all too well that there were probably hundreds and hundreds of sick people waiting to be healed in the towns of Galilee, but he also realized that he would not be able to help them, and that he would not be adequate to their demands unless from time to time he fed himself, renewed himself and looked at his own life against the backdrop of God's eternal purposes, so that he might know exactly what he was aiming at and where he was going. This is where he was and what he was doing when the father and the epileptic boy came to the little town in Galilee looking for Jesus.

All of this leads me to ask you this question: how long has it been since you have been alone by choice? I don't mean sadly alone in your room when you were longing for companionship. I mean deliberately alone, and deliberately withdrawn from the activity of the world for the specific purpose of renewing your own spiritual power and energy. How long has it been. I imagine it has been a long time for some of you. How often in the course of your life are you free from pressure - from the things that have to be done, the letters that have to be written, the appointments that have to be kept, the telephones that have to be answered? How long has it been since you were free from that kind of pressure so that your spirit had the opportunity to be responsive to the spirit of God.

This, I think is one of the clues that we get in this instance from our Lord. If we're at all serious about renewing our spiritual energies and gaining greater spiritual power, then we must make a deliberate effort to take time out from the rest of the world. When the well is empty, it fills slowly and quietly from the bottom. You cannot pour the water in from the top. It has to flow in from the springs that feed it and it takes time. One of the things, of course, that I'd like to do more than anything else is to make this church such a place so that this might happen to you.

Looking briefly once again at the conversation between Jesus and the father, we find the father saying something like this: "I brought my boy to you, but you weren't here, so I took him to the disciples, but they weren't able to do anything for him." And then Jesus, in that quiet, simple, and yet absolutely sure tone of voice said to the man, "Bring your son to me." You can almost hear the authority of Jesus in those words. As the father brought the boy over to Jesus, he suddenly experienced another convulsion and rolled over on the ground in front of Jesus, writhing in agony, and Jesus said to the father, "How long has he been like this" In this question of Jesus, you can almost hear the great compassion of God revealing itself. "How long has he been like this?" And the father says, "Ever since he was a little child". And the father goes on to describe the seriousness of the situation, how the convulsions have become stronger and how they have threatened to destroy his very life, and then with a kind of humble appeal, that just strikes the chords of the human heart, he says: IF...IF you can do anything for us, please take pity and help us."

And Jesus, in a tone of voice that was free from any critical accent, said "IF...IF I CAN. WHY ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE TO HIM WHO BELIEVES". Jesus here was not giving us a mathematical truth, but rather was pointing

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up one of the great spiritual truths of all times, a truth that has helped scores and scores of people around the hard corners of life. "All things are possible to him who believes". Jesus knew as well as we know today that nothing great is ever accomplished by those who begin with the word IF.

It makes one stop to wonder what would have happened back there in that first century if St. Paul had started out on his great missionary journeys by saying to himself..."If I can get enough money to keep alive, and if I can travel across the sea without being shipwrecked, and if I encounter no opposition, and if I can still cling to my belief in the risen Christ, and if all of these things are true, then I'll build a great church!" How far do you think we would have gotten? Rather he began by saying, "I can do all things through him that strengthens me!" It makes one stop to wonder what would happen if a doctor who is about to perform a serious operation on a patient were to say to that patient, "Now if everything goes according to plan, and if I run in to no complications, and if your body survives the shock of the operation, then I think you'll live". No....the good and wise doctor begins by saying, "We'll operate tomorrow, and in four weeks you'll be a new man!"

You see I think Jesus was trying to restore the confidence of the father. He knew that until he did this nothing would happen. This leads us into one of the reasons for our own spiritual exhaustion. We have very little confidence - in our religion, in ourselves, in God, in the teachings of Jesus. We begin just about everything we do with an IF. Nothing of great consequence and of great significance ever happens in any area of life until we believe in it. We'll never recover our spiritual energies until we can say, humbly, to be sure, and without any arrogance, with the father of the boy, "I believe, help thou my unbelief". Perhaps you can picture the father, as Jesus stood before him, strengthened and renewed in his confidence just by the sight of Jesus, saying: "I trust you. I trust my boy to your care. I want to trust more. I want to trust God. I want to trust life. I want to trust myself. I trust. Help me to trust even more". And so you see when a person is able to say something like that, then his spiritual powers begin to flow back into him and great things begin to happen.

THE CLIMAX: THE BOY IS CURED!

I think the climax of the story comes in the healing of the boy himself. Jesus stood there, a figure of tremendous authority, and said: "I command you, deaf and dumb spirit, come out of this boy, and never go into him again" The boy had one last terrible convulsion, and then lay like a corpse on the ground and everyone who was there said, "He's dead!" And then comes one of those wonderful lines which may not bear the entire meaning that I would like to read into it, but this is it: "But Jesus grasped his hands, and lifted him up, and then he stood on his own feet." What he needed was a start, he needed a lift, and once he had that from Jesus, he was able to stand on his own feet!

This is a sermon of encouragement. We know perfectly well that we shall never have the spiritual power that we should like to have. We know that we shall never have the spiritual energy that Jesus had. We know that we have to have help, whether it's in our own lives, or in the life of the country, or in the world. But what I would like to think is that in a place like this, and in the churches across our land, that people come and are coming, people who are down and out, people who have been worn down to the very nub of life, people who realize their spiritual weakness and exhaustion and because of what happens here, Jesus would take them by the hand and lift them up so that they are able to stand on their own feet. And so at

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the end of this sermon, in the quietness of His house, I feel that this is what we ought to pray for, and I would ask you to bow your heads and together let us pray for it now.

**PRAYER:**

We are conscious, Our Father, of our spiritual weakness. Help us to renew those energies which we need if we are to drive the devils out of our lives and out of the world. Help us to take time apart from the world of busy activity, and ground us in the things that we really believe so that when Jesus lifts us up, we shall be able to stand on our own feet. Amen

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