



I Believe, Help My Unbelief

TEXT
Mark 9:14–29

March 6, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In the book *unChristian*, a sociological study of young adult culture, the church is described as hypocritical.

A woman named Victoria, age 24, said this: *Everyone in my church gave me advice about how to raise my son, but a lot of the time they seemed to be reminding me that I have no husband — and besides, most of them were not following their own advice. It made it hard to care what they said. They were not practicing what they preached.*¹

You know what she is talking about. I don't know if you read the paper, but if you do, you can't read it very long without coming across a story of some religious leader who has embarrassed himself. There will be a story about someone who is supposed to be a moral leader, and this person is condemning folks or abusing children or playing fast and loose with finances — and then tries to cover it all up.

It bothers us if anyone does this, but when religious folks do it, it bothers us more deeply. We want nothing to do with people who demonstrate such a gap between what they profess and how they live. They are hypocrites.

Someone said, *Woe to the hypocrites ... you cross land and*

*sea for a single convert only to make them twice as fit for hell as you are yourselves. Woe to you hypocrites, you blind fools.*² That's pretty harsh. You know who said that? Jesus said it.

He had little tolerance for folks who wrap themselves in faith and then injure, or take advantage of, or abuse their neighbors. That's not holy. We know this, but the truth is, there is sometimes a gap between what we confess and how we live.

*We hold this treasure in clay jars, Paul says, that it might be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*³

It is a passage that points to the tension, and I would say unavoidable tension, between the treasure and the clay, between the strong and the weak, the trust and the doubt, the belief and the unbelief; the gap between what we confess and how we live.

A man comes to Jesus and asks Jesus to help. "Can you heal my son?"

"All things are possible for those who believe," Jesus says.

The man needs Jesus' help. He has no other place to go, no one else to turn to. The obvious answer is "I believe." But he is honest with himself. "I believe; help my unbelief!" I love that prayer.

He is honest that faith this demanding creates tension between the treasure and the clay. When we fail to live up to the teachings of the faith, we provide a poor witness to the love of God we know in Jesus Christ. That matters. Having said that, if any believe they do not suffer a gap between the calling of our faith and our lives, well, that is just a lack of self-reflection.

It seems to me that there is a type of hypocrisy that is unavoidable for followers of Jesus. I'm not sure it is possible to be Christian without being a hypocrite. I say that because Christians are always a mixture of "I believe; help my unbelief."

A father brings his son to Jesus. "Can you help my son?" Jesus says, "All things are possible for him who believes."

All things? On one level, we know that's not true. Peter Pan says you can fly if you believe; well, you can try that if you wish, but I wouldn't recommend jumping off the roof. It's not going to end well — belief or not. *All things are possible? No.*

In this moment, like every moment, what Jesus is talking about is the kingdom of God — that life that God intends for us. Jesus is teaching that his life can show up in us, if we believe.

When Jesus asks, “Do you believe?” it’s not a theology test. It’s not, “Do you believe certain things about Jesus?” It’s much bigger than that. He is asking if we trust him with our lives — to which the father says, “I believe; help my unbelief.” He says, *Yes, I believe, except when I don’t. Yes, I trust, but it’s hard when I am afraid. Yes, I am on the journey, but I am often uncertain of the next step. Yes, but you are asking me to trust you with everything, every moment, every relationship, every decision. I do trust you, but sometimes I don’t.*

It is the size of the expectation, the size of the calling that means as soon as we trust him, we also wonder about the wisdom of such trust. So we pray, “I believe; help my unbelief.”

I’m a mixture. I’m a mixture because Jesus is not asking me to trust that people can be kind. He is not asking to trust that there will be goodness in life. He is not asking to trust that we can survive our mistakes. He is asking us to trust that God will bring life from death; that God can change us; that the love of God can heal us. This gospel of Jesus is big — too big to trust without some wonder. It’s too big to squeeze down into certainty.

The circumstance for this man in our text is not can he pass a theology exam. It’s can he trust Jesus with that whom he loves the most. *I believe you can heal my son. I believe you can do the impossible. I believe tomorrow is not just yesterday lived over again, but a new day. I believe life can be transformed.* It’s no small belief, and it is the size of

his faith that renders his wonder.

Of course, there is a way to eliminate that unbelief. There is a way to do away with the doubt and to completely erase any gap between our faith and our living. We can erase hypocrisy. The way to ensure that our beliefs and our actions align is to adjust our beliefs to our practice. In other words, lower your expectations to something that you will always be able to meet.

I have never been much of an athlete. I’m slow and uncoordinated. But when I was younger, I had some potential. When I was in high school, I would go to my friend Stuart’s house, and we would play basketball. My favorite part was dunking the basketball. Have you ever dunked a basketball? There is nothing quite like the feeling of soaring up at the rim and throwing the ball down. Slam dunk — I loved it!

(I am pausing just a moment to let the absurdity of this sink in.)

In case you think I have just wandered off into fiction, you need to know Stuart had one of those goals that adjusted. You lower the goal from 10 feet to 6 feet. It was impossible to miss.

Much like the basketball goal, the way to ensure integrity between beliefs and action is to lower them so that you can’t miss. But that’s not possible with Christianity because the expectations for our lives are not something we set ourselves; they are set by Christ. He believes we can love neighbor and enemy and the people we meet in these pews. He believes we can go the

second mile, and we can see the best in one another. He believes we can forgive when it is needed most and hold on to hope even in the dark of midnight. He believes we can love like he loves.

I’m not always great at that. Do you know what I struggle with sometimes? I’m not the most patient person. Paul says love is patient and kind; it’s not arrogant or boastful.⁴ Patience is the first descriptor on the list. I’m not that great at it.

I hadn’t been your pastor very long and was still getting to know you. I was in Ace Hardware getting some bungee cords. I found what I needed and got to the register, and the package didn’t have a price on it. “I’ll go back and get another one,” I said. I got another one and waited in line again. But with this one, the package was broken. She said, “Oh, I think you’d better get another one; it’s a broken package and some of the bungee cords may have slipped out.”

So I go back a third time and find one with package integrity and an intact bar code. I wait in line again. She rings it up, and the little paper that prints the receipt — well, it was out. “This will just take a minute,” she said. She was a little optimistic about that. Finally, she printed out my receipt and with a big smile she said, “Have a nice day.”

I said (I shouldn’t tell you things like that; you would never do things like this.) “I’ll try ... with what’s left of it.”

Then she said, “See you Sunday!”

Oh my. I’m such a hypocrite. Sometimes there is a gap be-

tween what we believe and what we practice. It's painful.

I preach about love, but sometimes I'm not very patient; so I admit, I'm a hypocrite. If you choose to get married or have chosen to do so, you will make some remarkable promises. "I promise to be loving and faithful in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health."

So I suppose in the interest of avoiding hypocrisy, when I said, "I, Tom, promise to be loving and faithful ..." I could have said, "I, Tom, promise to be loving, but in full-disclosure, I'm not always patient. There was this time I was in Ace Hardware, and it didn't work out very well. So can we exclude patience?" Just lower that vow from 10 feet to 6 feet — can't miss! But then, that's not marriage either.

The same thing is true with faith. The Gospel is a 10-foot Gospel, and we can't lower it down to our comfort level. I'm not interested in adjusting the promise down to my life; I'm interested in adjusting my life up to the promise — to which, amazingly enough, Jesus says all things are possible.

The reason we get in so much trouble with this in church is because in church, we say out loud who God calls us to be. We don't lower the bar. We don't omit the expectation. We keep the calling at 10 feet. And we live into that hope every day.

Jesus looked into the eyes of a brokenhearted father and asked him, "Do you trust that I will take care of you? Do you trust that everything will be all right? Do

you trust that the power of God's love will heal your soul, and you don't have to be afraid anymore? Do you trust me with what you love and trust my love will never leave you? Do you trust me with your life?"

The man says the only thing he can say: "I believe; help my unbelief."

During seminary, I was a campus minister at Clemson University. I led the student fellowship group. At our meetings, students would take turns leading devotions.

One winter evening, Linn asked if he could do the devotion. Linn was the faculty advisor. A couple of years before I met them, Linn and his wife Kay lost their elementary aged son, Ashley, to leukemia. Linn shared his story. He spoke of weeping through the night in a hospital room, lifting pleading prayers to a silent ceiling: "God, heal my son."

Morning came, but there was no joy, for Ashley was dead. Linn said, "I will forever carry the scars of grief in my heart; but I want you to know that resurrection is not just for those who have died. Somehow God brings new life even to those who hurt so badly that our greatest fear is that we will never die. There will be a day when I will see Ashley again, but neither he nor I have to wait for that day for resurrection. I have been to hell, but bit by bit, heartbeat by heartbeat, God is resurrecting me. I am alive again."⁵

We have this treasure in clay jars that all may know that this power comes not from us,

but from God. It is power that breathes us to life again and again and again.

It is a holy love that brings our best selves to the front. It is a 10-foot-high Gospel that calls us to be the best people we can imagine; that calls us to trust the deepest hope we can hold; that calls us to live like God brings life from death.

It is a call to trust God with every moment, with every decision, with every relationship. To such a calling, the only honest thing we can say is — well, you know, so let's pray it together this time.

Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.

¹David Kinnaman, *unChristian* (2007), p. 41

²Matthew 23

³2 Corinthians 4:7

⁴1 Corinthians 13:4

⁵Linn and Kay Dearing served for decades as faculty advisors to the Presbyterian Student Association at Clemson University. Their faith has left an impact on many students, and at least one interim campus pastor.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.