

June 22nd, 2008

“The Last Year of the Life of Christ, Part 4”

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Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9:14-29, Luke 9:37-43

The next day, after they had come down from the mountain, Jesus approached His disciples and saw a large crowd surrounding them as they argued with some teachers of the law. The people were in awe at the sight of Him and ran up to welcome Him. He asked the teachers of the law, **“What are you arguing about?”**

In response, a man from the crowd came up to Him and dropped to his knees. “Teacher,” he said, “I beg you, please look at my son! Have mercy on him—he’s my only child! I brought him to you, Lord, because he’s an epileptic and suffers terribly from a demon that takes away his speech. Whenever it attacks him, he suddenly screams and falls down in convulsions. He foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth, and it leaves him only after bruising him up. He’s wasting away! I brought him to Your disciples and begged them to cast it out, but they couldn’t cure him.”

Then Jesus said, **“You obstinate people who refuse to believe—how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring your son here to Me.”**

So they brought the boy to Him, but even before he reached Him—as soon as the demon saw Jesus—it sent the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.

Then Jesus asked his father, **“How long has this been happening to him?”** “From childhood,” he replied. “Many times it has thrown him into the fire and into water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have pity on us and help us.”

Jesus answered, **“If You can?” Everything is possible for the one who believes.”**

“Lord, I do believe!” the father cried out. “Help me overcome my doubts!”

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, He rebuked the demon and said to it, **“You deaf and mute demon, I command you to come out of him. And never enter him again!”**

After shrieking and throwing the boy into a terrible convulsion, the demon came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many people said he was dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and began to lift him, and he got up. Then Jesus gave the boy back to his father. The boy was restored to health from that moment, and they all were astonished at the greatness of God.

After Jesus went into a house, His disciples approached Him privately and asked, “Why were we unable to cast it out?”

“Because you have so little genuine faith,” Jesus said. **“I tell you the truth, if you have faith even the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to over there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. But this kind will come out only through prayer [and fasting].”**

Thank you very much for coming to hear the message for today. Before we begin our next lesson, let us reiterate our reason for attending Church.

We attend Church to obtain the mind of Christ, meaning, to have the Bible illuminated in our minds so that we can clearly understand the principles that Jesus taught and base our daily personal decisions on those principles.

We come to Church because we want to be obedient to the Bible, which is the doctrine of Jesus Christ, in an informed, insightful and intelligent manner.

Let's take a minute to understand the power of the disciples to heal. Jesus gave his disciples access to the healing power in **Luke 9:1-2, 6**, which says:

1 Then [Jesus] called His twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases.

2 [Jesus] sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

6 So they departed and went through the towns, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere.

But healing power is actually in heaven, in the hands of God the Father. In **John 5:19-21**:
19 Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what [the Son] sees the Father do; for whatever [the Father] does, the Son also does in like manner.

20 For the Father loves the Son, and shows [the Son] all things that He, [the Father] Himself does; and [the Father] will show [the Son] greater works than these, that you may marvel.

21 For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will.

When Jesus told the disciples to heal, he said, in effect, "As I am following the example of the father, you follow my example. Do what you see me do. Just as when I speak, My Father reaches down from heaven to perform that which I say, when you speak, the Father will reach down from heaven to perform that which you say."

Of course, there are some caveats for speaking the power of God. Jesus explains, in **John 14:10**:

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works.

So Jesus is not speaking on His own authority, but is speaking, healing and doing that which God instructs Him. God the Father is focused on building the Church, and is laying the intellectual foundation of the Church through the miracles that Jesus does to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus called the apostles into ministry, and then asked God to allow the apostles to participate in the miracle ministry as they are to be the human foundation of the Church.

Consider, however, the position of the devil. Jesus has asked God to give His disciples the power to cast out demons, which will help destroy the devil's kingdom, and God has done so. Don't you think that the devil is going to have a reaction to this?

Yes, he is. The devil has already tried to derail Jesus, using his old standby, the power of suggestion. **Luke 4:1-4** records:

1 Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,

2 being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry.

3 And the devil said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”

4 But Jesus answered him, saying, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.’ ”

The devil found that Jesus was not vulnerable to the temptations of the flesh, of physical human desire. So the next suggestion to sin from the devil came in **Luke 4:5-8**:

5 Then the devil, taking [Jesus] up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.

6 And the devil said to Him, “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish.

7 Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.”

8 And Jesus answered and said to him, “Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’ ”

When there is a spiritual goal to be reached through trial, it is greatly tempting to take a shortcut to avoid the trial. Trials and tribulations cause the best of us to hesitate, and the devil’s suggestion that Jesus could obtain all of the kingdoms of the world and their glory while avoiding the trial of the Cross of Calvary was certainly a temptation. But Jesus’ ultimate objective was not to obtain the kingdoms of the world, but to create the Kingdom of God from those kingdoms. Jesus resisted the suggestion of the devil, and in so doing, He set the stage for thousand of martyrs to follow His example, dying at the hands of Roman executioners rather than recant their confession of Christianity. But Jesus’ answer does not stop the devil from continuing the temptation, in **Luke 4:9-12**:

9 Then [the devil] brought [Jesus] to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here.

10 For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you,’

11 and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

12 And Jesus answered and said to him, “It has been said, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God.’ ”

It is a temptation to those that have access to the power of God to use it for self-aggrandizement, to look or seem more important than they are. But Jesus cannot be successfully challenged to prove or to display the power that God has given Him outside of the will of God. As Jesus said in **John 14:10**:

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works.

Failing in his attempt to seduce Jesus into sin, the devil withdrew, realizing that the suggestions to sin that work on most people would not work on Jesus. **Luke 4:9-13** tells us:

13 Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time.

At the more opportune time, the issue with Jesus would not be temptation, but Jesus' death on the Cross. The devil's temptation of Jesus failed, and the devil could not deflect the wonder-working power that Jesus had given the disciples, but the devil still had the opportunity to use the power of suggestion to dissuade the disciples from effectively using the power that they had been given. The devil used Jesus' family to give the disciples reason to doubt the power to which Jesus gave them access, as **Mark 3:20-21** records:

20 Then the multitude came together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread.**21 But when [Jesus'] own people heard about this, [Jesus giving the twelve power to cast out demons and heal diseases] they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, "He is out of His mind."**

Consider how you would think if I gave you the power to cast out demons and heal diseases. Of course, I'm not Jesus, so I cannot actually give you any power, but suppose I told you that I did. Suppose you then saw my wife, my father and my brother calling the men with the white coats to come and get me? What effect would the influence of others have on you if you were surrounded by their doubt and unbelief?

Now, suppose that after my relatives came by to tell you how crazy I was, the President of the National Baptist Convention came by to tell you that I had been excommunicated from the Convention as a heretic, and that I was in league with the devil. **Mark 3:22** records:

22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebub," and, "By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons."

The question becomes, is Jesus just crazy, or is he actually demon possessed? Although the disciples argue to defend Jesus, the numbers of people that are defending one of the two alternatives to Jesus being the Son of God cause the disciples to begin doubting their previous judgment of Jesus' sanity and divinity. Imagine the disciples' thinking: 'If Jesus' own relatives don't believe in Him, and the religious leaders don't believe in Him, maybe we are being a bit naïve.'

So, just as the disciples were having these arguments with Jesus' people and the religious leaders and their thoughts are being redirected from faith to doubt, the man brought his demon-possessed son to the disciples to be healed. The doubt developed in the disciples by the negative suggestions kept them from using the power that Jesus gave them.

Hebrews 11:1 tells us:

1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Faith is the opposite of doubt. Since the foundation of any positive interaction between man and God is the faith that man has in God, the devil's primary objective is to destroy that foundation. Why could the disciples not cast out this particular demon? Well, the problem was not the demon, but with the disciple's response to the atmosphere of disbelief in the power of God that was in the crowd. It takes a strong faith to overcome an atmosphere of doubt, and the disciples found themselves questioning their faith in the midst of doubt.

The lesson that we learn from this episode is that if we want to successfully maintain our Christian walk, we need to study the Word of God and spend time with God in prayer to become confident in His truth, and we cannot allow suggestions of doubt from the world to distract us

from the truths of God. Christian beliefs and Christian morality are under attack from doubters even now, as people today will tell you that it is foolish to deny yourself pleasure in order to obey God even as they told the disciples that it was foolish to believe in the miraculous power of Jesus.

Doubt is based upon arguments, not evidence, and the world has plenty of arguments to create doubt in us. **Matthew 12:24** records:

24 Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.”

Listen to Jesus’ response to the scribes’ and Pharisees’ arguments, in **Matthew 12:25-28**:

25 But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand.

26 If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?

27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges.

28 But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Jesus’ counter argument to the religious leaders is twofold and simple. Jesus argues, first of all, that it does not make sense to say that the devil sent out demons to injure people, and then sent Jesus out to stop the demons that he just sent out to injure people from injuring them. Jesus then adds the argument that the scribes themselves pray to relieve people of demon possession. Jesus is doing the same thing that the scribes are doing, and is more successful than they. How can they logically say that their effort is from God while Jesus’ effort to do the same thing that they are doing is from the devil?

The argument of the religious leaders doesn’t make sense, but intelligence is not what they are counting on to persuade anyone that Jesus is in league with the devil. They are using their authority to persuade people that their claims about Jesus Christ are true.

An appeal to authority is not a logical argument, but one that requires us to neither think nor investigate, but simply take someone’s word. Although Jesus has authority, He does not argue from authority; Jesus argues from facts and actions. He tells the doubters, in **John 10:37-38**

37 If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me;

38 but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him.”

Unfortunately, the disciples were distracted by authority and began doubting Jesus’ evidence. They lost their ability to cast out demons. Our text says:

The next day, after they had come down from the mountain, Jesus approached His disciples and saw a large crowd surrounding them as they argued with some teachers of the law. The people were in awe at the sight of Him and ran up to welcome Him. He asked the teachers of the law, “What are you arguing about?”

In response, a man from the crowd came up to Him and dropped to his knees. “Teacher,” he said, “I beg you, please look at my son! Have mercy on him—he’s my only child! I brought him to you, Lord, because he’s an epileptic and suffers terribly from a demon that takes away his speech. Whenever it attacks him, he suddenly screams and falls

down in convulsions. He foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth, and it leaves him only after bruising him up. He's wasting away! I brought him to Your disciples and begged them to cast it out, but they couldn't cure him."

Jesus is justifiably disappointed with the disciples, whom He has shown many miracles and who should not have been intimidated by the scribes. Our text continues:

Then Jesus said, "You obstinate people who refuse to believe—how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring your son here to Me."

Jesus is about to give the disciples another object lesson on the power of God in the very presence of the doubters. Jesus intends to answer all questions and put all doubts to rest by healing this boy. Evidence will speak for itself. The text continues:

So they brought the boy to Him, but even before he reached Him—as soon as the demon saw Jesus—it sent the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.

Then Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" "From childhood," he replied. "Many times it has thrown him into the fire and into water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have pity on us and help us."

Because of his disappointment with the efforts of Jesus' disciples, the man doubted Jesus. The scribes had put doubt about Jesus in the minds of the people, postulating that the reason that Jesus' disciples could not cast out the demon was that the demonic power of the demon in the boy was stronger than the demonic power of Jesus. But Jesus arrived to set things right. He challenged the man to believe, as our text says:

Jesus answered, "If You can?" Everything is possible for the one who believes."

The man responded in both faith and doubt:

"Lord, I do believe!" the father cried out. "Help me overcome my doubts!"

The man cried for help to increase his faith in God. So Jesus helped the man, as our text tells us:

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, He rebuked the demon and said to it, "You deaf and mute demon, I command you to come out of him. And never enter him again!"

After shrieking and throwing the boy into a terrible convulsion, the demon came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many people said he was dead. But Jesus took him by the hand and began to lift him, and he got up. Then Jesus gave the boy back to his father. The boy was restored to health from that moment, and they all were astonished at the greatness of God.

Jesus proved that the power of God is immune to the poison of doubt. Jesus dispelled all of the negative arguments against Him at one time. Neither Jesus' sanity nor Jesus' godliness should have been an issue in the minds of the disciples and the mind of the man whose son was possessed any longer. No one that looked at this healing objectively could come to the conclusion that Jesus was either insane or demonic, but that the majesty of His works proved that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God.

But the lesson is not over. Jesus' healing power is always effective, because Jesus communes with God and understands God's will before He begins to pray. However, sometimes

the conditions for which we pray and the outcomes that we desire do not meet God's approval. There are some things that God tells us that we cannot have. **Hebrews 9:27** tells us:

27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.

Death is certain. Faith in God and diligent prayer will not allow us to avoid it. Jesus was able to heal sickness and disease; in fact, there was no human circumstance that Jesus could not overcome. Nevertheless, millions of faithful Christians have died over the years, simply because of the fact recorded in **Hebrews 9:27**.

Death is a universal condition, death is part of God's plan, and we cannot stop death, even with the healing power of God. **Psalms 90:10** tells us:

10 The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

Prayer and healing are limited by the will of man and the plan of God, and we cannot cross those limits. Understand that it was not God's intention that Adam and Eve leave the Garden, however, God put them out of the Garden as a Divine response to their own actions. Sometimes our healing is precluded by our own actions, by that which we did to get into the situation that requires healing. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of healing that we can do, and we are admonished by God to be faithful to Him, even in the face of the human disappointments that His limits on the world create in our lives.

The text, and the lesson to the disciples, continues:

After Jesus went into a house, His disciples approached Him privately and asked, "Why were we unable to cast it out?"

The disciples question showed that they still held a preconceived misconception. They were still of the opinion that they should control the power to which Jesus had given them access. They had not yet grasped the concept that the control of the power is with God, and that God will respond with power when their faith and the conditions meet His approval. Jesus responds with the answer:

"Because you have so little genuine faith," Jesus said. "I tell you the truth, if you have faith even the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to over there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. But this kind will come out only through prayer [and fasting]."

Genesis 1:27-28 tells us:

27 So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

28 Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

God's initial plan was to give dominion over the entire earth to man. But God changed the plan in response to man's sin, bringing death into the world. **Romans 6:23a** tells us:

23 For the wages of sin is death.

However, God's plan for us now is life from the dead through Jesus Christ, as **1 Corinthians 15:22** tells us:

22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

But in order to access the plan of God, we must be in the will of God. All shall be made

alive, but only through Christ. We can only access the will of God by obeying His Word, which requires communication with Him, including prayer and devotion to God through the denial of the self, which Jesus calls fasting. As Jesus said in **John 14:10**:

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works.

The Father communicated with Jesus through Jesus' prayer life. Before Jesus healed Lazarus, He prayed that the power that He was about to exhibit would cause those there to believe in God. In the Garden of Gethsemane before Jesus went to the Cross, He prayed for the ability to do God's will, and God sent Jesus an angel to strengthen Him for the ordeal of the Cross. The Father also communicates with us through prayer.

Prayer is how we find out the plan of God for our lives, and our faith, exhibited as our devotion to God through the denial of the self, allows us to execute the plan to God's specifications.

So the key to communion with God is communication with Him through prayer, and the physical exhibition of our devotion to Him through fasting.

I consider myself devoted to my wife. I probably don't do everything that I should do to show my devotion, but one thing that I do is that when we go out to dance, I only dance with her. As you may or may not know, in the groups of ballroom dancers that we frequent, there are usually at least twice as many women available to dance than men. Since the imbalance is so great, the men generally have their choice of women with which to dance. I, however, violate the norm by being devotedly focused, and I exhibit that focus by dancing only with my wife. My dance instructors try to convince me to dance with other women using the argument that dancing with a variety of women would increase my dancing skill, but my counter argument is that although it would probably be nice to be a better dancer, I'm not dancing to learn dance skills; I'm dancing to enjoy life with my wife. **Ecclesiastes 9:9** tells me:

9 Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun.

Proverbs 5:18-19 says:

18 Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice with the wife of your youth.

19 As a loving deer and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; And always be enraptured with her love.

Neither of these passages of Scripture directly comment on ballroom dancing, but I think that they both make the point, in the words, "all the days of your vain life" and "always be enraptured with her love" that the marital relationship is meant to sustain us exclusively all of the days of our lives.

I believe that having exclusive time and exclusive activities with my wife cements our marital relationship. As a parallel, having exclusive time with God through prayer, and physical devotion to Him by the denial of self as we focus on Him, cements our conscious spiritual relationship with Him.

Of course, if I spend my time at the dance being inattentive to my wife and flirting with someone other than my wife when we are not dancing, the fact that I dance with only her would

not be much comfort for her. Likewise, fasting is intended to be a physical sign of our spiritual devotion to God, and denying ourselves food or other things without devotion to God is not the fast for which God is looking. **Isaiah 58:3-5** says:

3 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?' 'In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your laborers.

4 Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day, To make your voice heard on high.

5 Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD?

God goes on to specify the nature of a true fast, in **Isaiah 58:6-11**, which says:

6 'Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' 'If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,

10 If you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your darkness shall be as the noonday.

11 The LORD will guide you continually, And satisfy your soul in drought, And strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

When prayer is a fervent request for communication with God as we endeavor to determine and do His will, and fasting is a resolute devotion to God and to the execution of His plan, we will have power with God, because Jesus is our intercessor, and gave Himself on the Old Rugged Cross to wash away the stain of our sin and give us access to God. He tells us, in **Hebrews 10:19-25**:

19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God,

22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,

25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Let us resolve to increase our communication with God through the disciplines of prayer and fasting, so that we might be ready when faced with the doubting arguments of the wicked, and able to stand the trials and tribulations with faith in the face of the evil one.

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