

Can you handle it?

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- [0 : 00] life is a complicated business. And if we are to live life well, there is some stuff that we need to know.
- We need to know what not to do. That's basic. How many lives are messed up, our lives, because we do what we ought not to do. We need to know what we ought not to do.
- We also need to know what to do. And we also need to know who can help us. And our passage this morning presents us with those three lessons ably taught by means of example by the disciples, by a distraught father, and by Jesus.
- And the example of each of these characters in the account can be captured by attributing to them a phrase that reflects their attitude to the tragedy before them of this demon-possessed boy and the great suffering that he was enduring.
- For the disciples, the phrase could be, we can handle this. And that's what we ought not to do. Not to be like them.
- [1 : 18] In the face of this, this was their initial response. We can handle this. And we'll see in a moment how we come to that conclusion. For the father of the boy, the phrase that captures his attitude could be, I can't handle this.
- And then finally, for Jesus, the phrase that captures his response to the tragedy before him could be, I will handle this.
- The disciples will illustrate for us what we ought not to do. The father will illustrate for us what we ought to do. And Jesus will demonstrate himself to be the one that we can turn to for help.
- Let's think of all, first of all then, about the disciples. We can handle this. I think we can identify three stages in the involvement of the disciples here on this occasion.
- There's the initial confidence reflected in that phrase that I'm putting into their mouths. We can handle this. The initial confidence. But then, of course, there's the disappointing reality.
- [2 : 32] And then it's followed by a spiritual explanation that is given by Jesus as to the reason for their failure, despite the confidence that they appear to have had.
- So let's think about these three elements that follow in sequence. First of all, we have their initial confidence. Maybe we need to just set the scene briefly.
- Jesus, Peter, James, and John head up the mountain, leaving the other disciples behind. While they're up on the mountain, this father comes looking for Jesus.
- And he comes looking for Jesus because his life is marked by this tragedy of his son who is demon-possessed.
- But when he comes to look for Jesus, Jesus isn't there. He's up the mountain with Peter, James, and John. But the father, in his desperation, then turns to the disciples to see if perhaps the disciples could help him.
- [3 : 38] We know that from his own mirth. In verse 18, in the second part of the verse, once Jesus appears, he tells what had happened.

I asked your disciples to drive out the Spirit, but they could not. I wonder when he first approached the disciples with his request.

I wonder if in the disciples there was a moment when they were thinking, well, what do we do? What do we do with this man and his son? I wonder if some of them thought about saying, well, I'm sorry, pal.

The boss isn't here. We can't do anything for you. Doesn't seem that that was their response. And there was no reason for it to be their response.

These are men who had already given evidence of being able to drive out demons. They had been commissioned for that very task by Jesus. We just remind ourselves of what we read in a previous chapter in chapter 6 of Mark's Gospel.

[4 : 47] In verse 7, we read, calling the twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. This has already happened.

Jesus had already granted to his disciples this authority. And not only had he granted them the authority, but we're told that they had exercised that authority. Verse 13 of that same chapter, chapter 6, we read, they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.

Why would this demon be any different from the others? So the disciples do endeavor to drive out this demon. They don't say, we can't do that.

No, they try to do it. The Father is very clear. He says very explicitly that the disciples could not. He doesn't say that they would not.

He says they could not. They tried, but they couldn't. They proved incapable of driving out this demon. when they first tried to do so.

[5 : 58] Were they confident? Well, we don't know for sure. We're not given that information explicitly, but I suspect that they were. There was at least some measure of confidence.

The very fact that they tried to do so would suggest that. But there's another reason that I'll mention in a moment and we'll come to that. But you have then this initial confidence.

But of course, it's followed almost immediately by the disappointing reality. As the Father so eloquently declares, they could not. They tried, but they couldn't do anything for my son.

They couldn't do anything for me. My son is in the same condition as I brought him. The disciples proved powerless to help. The disciples fail.

They fail big time. So what do they do in the face of their failure? Well, it's quite striking what they do or what happens immediately following their failure.

[6 : 57] The disciples retreat from the difficult world of spiritual warfare to the more comfortable arena of theological discussion.

You see, they're found there by Jesus arguing with the teachers of the law. As I was thinking about that retreat from the front line as it were. Now, don't misunderstand me. The need for vigorous theological study and discussion is the front line in the gospel.

But isn't there a sense in which sometimes it can be comfortable for us to have theological discussions and conversations about points of doctrine among ourselves when really all that is is a retreat from the front line.

This is what the disciples do. Well, this is too difficult. These demons, no, we can't handle them. Let's have a conversation about theology with these men who are approaching us and challenging us.

But of course, the disappointing reality, and this is really the focus, is that they could not help the man. But then we have in the passage a reason given, an explanation for their failure.

[8 : 13] These are men who had been given authority. These are men who had already given evidence of being able to exercise that authority, but in this occasion they fail. Why? Well, I think the explanation is found in both a word of rebuke that we read in the passage, but also in a word of instruction, you might call it, though it also has a flavor of rebuke to it, both given by Jesus.

In verse 19, in the face of the disciples' failure, we read what Jesus immediately says, O unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?

Bring the boy to me. I think these words are directed more generally. They're not directed solely to the disciples, but I think the disciples are included in Jesus' disappointment, if we can use that language, in the face of what he is seeing, in the face of the unbelief that is the explanation for the inability of the disciples to cast out this demon that was afflicting this boy.

And so in the words of Jesus, there is a rebuke of their unbelief. But there's also, in verse 29, just moving towards the end of the account, what we're calling a word of instruction, though it is also a gentle word of rebuke, also, I would suggest.

In verse 29, when you have this discussion between Jesus and the disciples as to why it was that they couldn't cast out the demon, Jesus says, this kind can come out only by prayer.

[9 : 52] Now these are words that have fascinated readers of the Gospels over the years. And I think the fascination sometimes is because we tend to focus, I would suggest, unhelpfully, on these words as implying that this was a particularly extreme case of demon possession.

Oh, there were easy cases that the disciples could handle, but this was a really difficult one. And they couldn't handle this one because it was so difficult. But I think what Jesus rather is doing is identifying what the disciples on this occasion failed to do.

They hadn't prayed. I would imagine that when they were first commissioned by Jesus and at that moment so conscious of their dependence on the authority and the power of Jesus, when they exercised that ministry, they did so in reliance upon Jesus.

But now they've done this often. They know how to cast out demons. They've done it many times. Well, here's another one. We can handle this.

We don't need to pray. We don't need to depend on God. We don't need to seek His help. We can do this. We can do this. We can handle this. And so they failed to pray.

[11 : 09] Hence, the instruction, the rebuke of Jesus and the explanation for their failure this kind any kind can come out only by prayer.

The disciples hadn't sought God's help, God's empowerment. They had imagined that they could handle this. But they couldn't. Not in their own strength.

This is why I think the disciples were initially confident. They didn't think prayer was necessary. That in itself, evidence of their misplaced confidence. We don't need to pray.

We can sort out this problem of this boy and this poor man who's coming looking for Jesus and Jesus isn't here but that's okay. We're here. This is what we ought not to do in life and in service to God.

You need God's help in everything. God's help. We stand in need of God's help and enabling.

[12 : 28] To pray is to acknowledge that you can't handle it on your own. I wonder if this rings true for you for you.

Are you making this mistake in your life? Perhaps in your service for God of imagining I can handle this. Perhaps as a husband in your duties as a husband or as a wife as a parent I can handle this.

Been a husband for 20 years haven't done such a bad job I can handle this. Perhaps in your witness as a Christian at work you go in every day. Every day you have this call upon you to witness to others concerning your Savior.

You've done it so often you've been there so often you can handle it. Maybe in the tasks that you perform here in the congregation teaching Sunday school giving a talk to the teenagers at Legacy attending a meeting of the deacon's court I can handle this.

I've done this so often I can do this with my eyes shut. I can handle it. But the holiday club starting tomorrow now this is an annual holiday club every year this last week of the holidays.

[13 : 47] You know when you have something with that kind of regularity it's good but isn't there always the danger of getting to that point and saying well we can handle this.

We do it every year it always works out okay. It always seems to be fine. Do we really need to ask God to help us? Do we really need to be in prayer day by day that he would enable and provide?

We can handle it. We need to pray. As a congregation we've set aside a morning a week Saturday to pray.

and we've done that because we're trying to acknowledge maybe very inadequately that we can't handle it. That there are issues and challenges facing us that we cannot confront and overcome in our own strength.

And maybe we've been trying to do so and have been failing miserably but haven't really quite worked out why. And Jesus comes this morning he says this kind can come out only by prayer and that's any kind.

[14 : 56] without his help we can do nothing. As we think about that time of prayer together if it's your conviction that we can handle it that everything is under control that we don't need help then don't come.

That's okay. But if you acknowledge that we can't handle it that you can't handle it that we need help then come and let's pray together.

Well that's the disciples giving us this example of what not to do not to rely on ourselves not to foolishly declare or imagine I can handle this.

But then we have the Father. And the Father we've suggested we could summarize his attitude to the crisis that he was facing in these words I can't handle this. And we can maybe think about the Father's plight and then consider the Father's plea or prayer.

What about his plight? Well we've read the passage we can maybe identify in a measure with his pain we can feel his pain. As I was thinking about this matter of feeling somebody's pain the image that came to my mind was an image that I saw on the TV just in the last week or so of that Muslim father at the Democrat convention.

[16 : 20] Some of you may have seen the news item became a news item because of how Trump responded to this father. This was the father whose son had died in combat and he was speaking at the Democratic convention and his wife was next to him and she said nothing she was simply there standing you can maybe see the image yourselves if you've seen the news report.

And of course Trump's less than what shall we say diplomatic response to that was oh that woman she didn't say anything she probably wasn't allowed to speak and of course there's a big hoo-ha understandably that response to this man speaking about his son who had died but the interesting thing was that when the mother was eventually interviewed what she said was I didn't say anything but I sensed that America could feel my pain and I think she was right.

you might say oh it's all just a big set up to pull at the heart strings but that was her testimony I felt that America could feel my pain of her lost son well I don't know if we in a measure can feel the pain of this father as he is presented to us not silently he had plenty to say or certainly he had words to say but we have not only his words we have the scene described and it is a sorry scene of the condition that his son was in he describes it himself there in verse 17 my son possessed by a spirit who has robbed him of speech whenever it seizes him it throws him to the ground he foams at the mouth gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid and there's further description of his condition when Jesus asks him about it there in verse 21 Jesus asked the boy's father how long has he been like this from childhood he answered it has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him it's a terrible condition that the boy is suffering from and you can just imagine at least in some measure the father's pain in the face of this terrible condition just as an aside it's worth mentioning that in Matthew's gospel the condition interestingly is described as epilepsy and the symptoms seem to concur with that and that has created for some a difficulty well what is this is this a physical condition or is it a spiritual condition of demonic possession and of course many critics would jump on this and say oh these are just ignorant men who don't understand science and medicine and so they're describing physical conditions in this spiritual way but of course we don't need to choose between the two it's perfectly plausible that it could have been both an epileptic condition that the demon took advantage of to create further pain and suffering for this boy and his father the point is that the man is suffering terribly this situation must have dominated his life death you know when you read of what it resulted in especially what it says there in verse 22 it has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him what a desperate life to live to be always on the alert at any point this could happen his life was dominated by protecting his son as well as witnessing the terrible symptoms of his condition this was the father's plight and perhaps the most moving aspect of it is how the father so wholly identifies with his son's pain his son's pain is his pain and we notice that in the very language that he uses when he addresses

Jesus and he says there at the end of verse 21 take pity on us and help us he doesn't say take pity on him this poor boy no take pity on us we suffer together take pity on us and help us this is the father's plight just imagine if somebody had been insensitive enough to approach that man and said to him how are you coping or can you handle this I'm sure the man would have said no I can't I can't handle this no of course I can't handle this and that is how he comes to Jesus as one who recognizes that he can't handle the situation that he is confronting he can't handle it and so that brings us to the father's plea or the father's prayer and I'm calling the father's approach to Jesus his prayer with the intention of contrasting his attitude of dependency upon Jesus to the presumptuous independence of the disciples they didn't need to pray they didn't need to depend on

Jesus so they thought they could handle it and in stark contrast you have the father who is wholly acknowledging his utter inability that he can't handle what is before him and so I describe his approach as his prayer evidence of his dependence upon Jesus his approach is prayerful even if he himself wouldn't have described what he was doing in that language let's just notice the stages of the father's encounter with Jesus and as we notice them without major comment let's just look and learn verse 17 we read of the father's approach he approached Jesus he didn't find him but then Jesus came down the mountain he approaches Jesus for help in that alone he's acknowledging his need in that alone he is an example for us we need to approach Jesus in our need in our trial in the crisis that we face approaching and as we do acknowledge our need of him he opens up to

[22 : 36] Jesus Jesus gives him that opportunity the question is posed by Jesus in verse 21 how long has he been like this the man in a few words the words that are recorded maybe there were more words but even in the words recorded in a few words he opens up to Jesus from childhood he has often thrown him into the fire water to kill him he opens up reveals to Jesus his need he pleads with Jesus in that same verse 22 but if you can do anything take pity on us and help us the order of the words that the man uttered it would seem were help us take pity on us have compassion on us he is seeking help and his hope of help rests in the compassion of Jesus help us have compassion on us but his hope though real is tentative if you can if you can help us have compassion on us the man's faith for it is faith as we'll comment in a moment is a huge encouragement to the likes of us who often are tentative who often are unsure as to what response we will receive as we seek

God's help well here is a man who was tentative he is a man who was unsure yet he opened up to Jesus he revealed his weakness and his insufficiency and rested in the sufficiency of Jesus he's honest with Jesus I do believe help my unbelief these are in many words the most memorable and distinctive words of the whole episode we're familiar with them only recorded by Mark curiously I do believe help my unbelief and both of the elements there that he declares I do believe help my unbelief both of these elements not just the first are essential to his faith and trust in Jesus both elements are to be found I might even dare to say have to be found in saving faith I do believe that is necessary that is important that is essential we need to believe we need to trust in Jesus the father needed to believe as you need to believe in Jesus but also help my unbelief you see in these words you don't have a declaration of a man who doesn't have faith rather you have the declaration of a man with an honest appreciation of his insufficiency and a turning to Jesus to grant him even in the matter of faith what he lacks and this is true faith this is saving faith biblical faith gospel faith it is to cry out

I can't handle this I can't do anything I can't even believe as I ought never mind solve all the problems that confront me help me notice that the very same verb that he uses the verb help is used in relation to the help needed for his son help us and the help needed for his lack of faith you see in both of these ways he was acknowledging his insufficiency and turning to the sufficiency of Jesus and that is saving faith I can't I don't have the resources I'm not able not even to believe as I ought and I turn to Jesus that he would supply that which I am lacking well let's turn finally to Jesus we suggested that we could characterize or summarize Jesus his attitude to what was before him with these words I will handle this you see the chaotic scene at the foot of the mountain it stands in stark contrast to the glorious scene played out on the mountain top but it is the scene at the foot of the mountain that eloquently illustrates the human condition in the face of crisis and trouble and pain and suffering what do we find?

Well we find the good intentions of the disciples they tried to help but they could not. We find their failed attempts to help the man and his son. We find them sadly walking away in the face of their failure and we see all the chaos that results from their inability to help this man. Does that look familiar? Is that not a scene that is played out in a multiplicity of ways and circumstances in our own lives and in the world that we live in broken by sin?

And what of Jesus in the face of this chaotic scene? Well let's just notice his calm resolve. His saving word and his authority to act. His calm resolve. There in verse 19 there are words that seem very in many ways very insignificant not of great weight and yet I think they say a great deal.

[28 : 13] They had in verse 19. They had in verse 19. Having rebuked the crowd and the disciples you have these final words recorded in that verse. Bring the boy to me.

They're simple words of instruction. They're simple words of instruction, a request. But knowing Jesus they are so much more. At this point there is already only one outcome. There is only one outcome and it is a happy outcome.

The moment Jesus says, bring the boy to me. Light shines on that sorry scene. Even before we see the miracle. Even before the words of command. These words of quiet resolve guarantee the outcome.

Because when Jesus says, bring the boy to me. There can be only one outcome. This quiet resolve on the part of Jesus. But it's followed of course by his saving word.

In verse 25 we read, when Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene he rebuked the evil spirit. You deaf and mute spirit he said, I command you come out of him and never enter him again.

[29 : 30] It's a word of command. It's a word of command. It's a word of liberation. It's a word also of enduring protection. Never again torment this boy. Never again.

You are forbidden from tormenting him anymore. This is the saving, powerful word of Jesus. Then just notice it's displayed, but let's just think about his authority to act in this way.

That he does so is clear. He commands and the demon obeys without question. Though accompanied by some demonic foot stomping.

There's maybe a way we could describe what he does there in verse 25. He rebuked the evil spirit and then in verse 26 the spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. Bit of foot stomping, but hey, he has to obey.

And he does obey. The authority is clear. It's there to see. But really the question that I'm posing is, where does it come from, this authority? What are the grounds of his authority?

[30 : 36] And I think we can identify two strands of his authority that are intertwined. His person, who he is, and his work. Mark, really throughout the gospel, what he's doing is convincing us of who Jesus is.

The eternal son of God. And as such, he has this authority. We've already seen in the chapters that have preceded his authority over sin. His authority over the elements.

His authority over death and disease and so on. And here again, we see his authority. And in this way, Mark is saying, look who this man is. He is the son of God.

And as the son of God, he has this intrinsic authority that he has ever had. Because of who he is. He enjoys absolute authority over all the created order, including the devil and his minions.

But I think there's another aspect to the authority of Jesus, and that is the work that he does. There may be significance, and I leave it to you to come to your own conclusion, whether this is a legitimate connection to draw.

[31 : 43] But it seems to me there may be significance in what Mark immediately goes on to record after having told us of this incident. He goes on to tell us of how Jesus, for the second time, announces his impending death.

We have it there at the end of the passage that we've read. And this, of course, was a death that would inflict on every malign principality and power a crushing and definitive defeat.

Listen to what Paul says concerning the effect of the death of Jesus on the forces of evil. As he records it for us there in his letter to the believers in Colossians, chapter 2 and verse 15, he speaks of the cross, and he says of the cross and of its effect, and having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

By the cross, Jesus establishes his authority, and it is authority that continues in time from the cross, but extends in time beyond and behind the cross.

It is this same work that explains the authority we find here, his person who he is, but the victory that he would win over the devil and his forces.

[33 : 11] Jesus could handle the crisis. I will handle this. Bring me the boy. Just bring me the boy. He had the power and he had the authority, and authority grounded in who he is and what he was to do, the victory that he would win over death and the devil at Calvary.

And as we look back to what happened 2,000 years ago, we are reminded and we remember that today, in the face of every crisis, in the face of every trial, Jesus is still able to declare to us and to you, I can handle this.

I can handle this. He can help, and he can help you turn to him with this poor father. And may your words be the words of the father, the words we've attributed to him.

I can't handle this, but you can. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for what we learned concerning your son, Jesus.

We pray that we would know something of this faith, of this man, a tentative faith, an unsure faith, but genuine and sincere, and indeed, saving faith.

[34 : 36] We pray that that would be the faith that would characterize us, that we would be able to humbly acknowledge, and to declare, and to testify, I do believe, that we would also have the honesty and the sincerity to declare and acknowledge, help my unbelief.

And we thank you that in our need, in our insufficiency, we turn to the one who is altogether sufficient, to the one who is altogether able. We pray that as we turn to him, so we would discover, as this man did, that he can handle it.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.