

The Compassion of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Well, up on the screen, there's a picture by the Italian artist Raphael, and it's a painting of the Transfiguration. Hopefully you can see it. It might look like a blob. I guess if you really wanted to see the real thing, it's in the Vatican, so you could go to the Vatican Museum and see it there.

But this is the passage that we looked at last week, the Transfiguration of Jesus, just before the one that we read. And if you look at Raphael's Transfiguration, you can see that it's really divided into two distinct parts.

So as Raphael tries to contrast the light on the top of the mountain, Jesus transfigured Moses, Elijah, the disciples there up top. And then there's the bottom half, the darkness below.

So on the top half, there's the scene on the mountain, the glory of Jesus is shining out. And then on the bottom half, there's this scene in the valley below, which was our reading today. And below, it's a scene of darkness and of despair as the disciples fail to help this boy who is possessed by a demon.

And I guess Raphael is trying to portray what is actually there in the Gospel of Mark, which is the contrast between the Transfiguration on the top of the mountain and the tragedy in the valley below.

[1 : 1 4] And so what's needed is for Jesus to come and to enter the darkness, to enter the unbelief that is going on, and to heal the demon-possessed boy.

Okay, that's the picture. So the passage here essentially is telling us about human inadequacy and Jesus' sufficiency.

How our human inadequacy is met by Jesus' sufficiency. And so the application for all of us, whether we'd call ourselves a Christian or not, is really that we must trust in Jesus, not ourselves.

And so I'd like us to look at this passage under these two headings this afternoon, and then we'll apply it. First of all, the inadequacy of humanity, verse 14 to 19. Basically, we can't.

And then secondly, the sufficiency of Jesus. Basically, Jesus can. So first, the inadequacy of humanity. The inadequacy of humanity is clear because at the foot of the mountain, two groups of people are highlighted.

[2 : 1 8] They are in verse 14. When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and the teachers of the law arguing with them. So there's the power or lack of power with the disciples and the teachers of the law.

None of them, despite being disciples of Jesus, despite being Jewish religious intellectuals, none of them are able to help this demon-possessed boy.

And they're just arguing. And so the teachers of the law, they essentially represent the unbelief of the Jewish establishment when it comes to Jesus. And the disciples, his followers, their unbelief is clear.

We've seen it before. They don't grasp or understand why Jesus came. And so they're all inadequate because none of them can help this boy with the evil spirit. And so here's the scene.

While Jesus was up on the mountain with Peter, James, and John, down below, the rest of the disciples were basically trying to crack on with the work of Jesus, with the work of the kingdom.

[3 : 22] But they couldn't do it without Jesus. They had a bad day in the office, so to speak. And like the story of the transfiguration beforehand, before this reading, there's an echo here of Moses, another echo of Moses on the mountain in Exodus.

Because when Moses is up in the mountain, he comes down. And what does he find when he descends from the mountain, gets down to the ground? Well, below, he discovers unfaithfulness and unbelief amongst the Israelites.

And really, that's what Jesus finds here when he descends from the mountain on which he was transfigured. And so verse 15 tells us, as soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

So the people realized teachers of the law couldn't deal with this boy. Disciples couldn't deal with this boy. But here comes Jesus, and there's joy that Jesus comes. So Jesus says, verse 16, what are you arguing with them about?

So it's a desperate situation, and it needs Jesus. And so when Jesus asks, what are you arguing about? They were arguing about the demon-possessed boy, because nobody could do anything for him.

[4 : 33] Because that's how the father responds. In verse 17, he says, A man in the crowd answered, Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that 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. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not. Now, can you imagine the father's desperation here?

His precious boy, possessed by an evil spirit, is basically tortured. And his father longs for him to be free from this torture. And it meant the boy couldn't speak.

He had severe seizures that threw him to the ground. He would foam at the mouth. He would gnash his teeth. And he would become rigid. And it may sound like epilepsy, but it's clear to the father, and it's, Jesus knows, that this is a demonic attack.

It's an evil spirit. And his body was controlled by the evil spirit to such an extent that it made his life a misery. And so you can imagine how the father is just desperate for Jesus to help his son.

[5 : 42] And you can sense the father's disappointment that the disciples, who he thought could help his son, actually can't. And what's interesting is that the disciples had been able to cast out demons before in the gospel of Mark.

So when Jesus first sent them out on his mission, we read in Mark chapter 6, verse 13, that they drove out many demons and anointed with oil many people who were ill and healed them.

And so the disciples probably went into this situation thinking, okay, we've got this. We've done this before. We've seen this kind of thing.

We can deal with it. As if they just needed to somehow roll up their sleeves, tell the crowd, stand back, let us through. We're disciples, you know, like Ghostbusters, when they come charging through, smoke, lights, the disciples.

We're here, not a problem for us. And yet they fail miserably. They're inadequate for the task. And so what's going on here? Why couldn't they do what they were able to do before?

[6 : 43] Well, the disciples would discover when they asked Jesus in private. And we'll get to that at the end in verse 28. But let's not miss the boy's tragic, hopeless condition.

Nor the father's distress and his despair at watching an evil spirit control his boy's life and wreck it. Now, I guess it's easy for us to gloss over this kind of demonic activity because it's not the kind of thing that really many of us or even any of us experience here today.

And yet spiritual warfare is very real. However, it's expressed. And so it should never be dismissed. And so what this incident does is it highlights the powers of evil, the power of Satan, the devil, and the weakness of humanity to do anything about it.

And yet the good news is that Jesus came to defeat and will ultimately destroy the devil and all his demons. And only Jesus has got the power to do this.

And I think that's why Jesus is frustrated by the unbelief that he finds. In verse 19, he says, You unbelieving generation, Jesus replied. How long shall I stay with you?

[7 : 56] How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me. Jesus calls him an unbelieving or maybe translated faithless generation. But who is he talking to here?

Well, of course, he's referring to the unbelieving and faithless teachers of the law who rejected Jesus and didn't believe in him. They're there. But he's surely also referring to his disciples because they've also shown a lack of understanding and therefore a lack of belief in who Jesus is and what his mission is.

They don't believe yet that Jesus came to die. And that's why Jesus says, How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? He's exasperated at this generation of people, disciples included, who fail to believe.

And today, we also fail to believe in Jesus when we think we don't need him. Or when we think we can do things in our own strength. Just like the disciples thought here.

Because we like to think that we've got what it takes to meet any and every situation in life with our own strength. And that's how we are culturally conditioned to behave, isn't it?

[9 : 09] Our culture tells us that we can be who we want to be. Just be you. You do you. Be true to yourself. And it all sounds good. And we do like to think it's true that we've got this power.

And it's a power within to be whoever we want to be and to do whatever we want to do. That we've got the ability to achieve, to succeed. And we don't need anybody else.

We can do it ourselves. We like to think that. And it's what we teach our children in school. It's even what we preach at them in the movies. That you have the power to do whatever you want to do with your life.

That's certainly the message from Disney Pixar's latest film, which is called Turning Red. I don't know if you've seen it. I haven't seen it. But I read a good review of it. But it's essentially saying embrace who you are.

Act on your impulses. Don't let anyone, even your parents, stop you in your quest to be whatever sort of person you want to be. Don't worry about the consequences.

[10 : 12] Don't worry who gets hurt. You just make sure you're okay because you have the power within you to do it. And it's supposed to be an empowering message. But in reality, it is a really dangerous message to give.

Because with it, we fail to see the limits of our human condition. And we can be deluded into thinking that we have got what it takes to be our own saviour and Lord. That I can make a success at life myself with my own powers and my own strength.

That I can do it all myself. And yet the reality is that we can't. There are some things that we just can't do. There are some things that we're just not strong enough to cope with.

Some things that we shouldn't be. Some situations that we will never be able to change. And so what this passage does is it teaches us to face up to our human inadequacy.

That we are weak. We are fragile. We do get sick. We do need help. We do grow old. And we do die. And so there are severe limits to what we can do as human beings.

[11 : 23] And that's why we've got to understand our true human condition. That we do live in a fallen and in a broken world. A world that isn't despair. That isn't darkness.

And needs help. And in the gospels we see that Jesus is the one who comes. And he is the only one who can help humanity's greatest needs and deepest problems.

And this world is full of evil because we have turned away from God. And so if we don't realize our inadequacy in this world of darkness, despair and disorder. Then we'll never see our need for Jesus.

We'll never go to him as the one that we need. So that's why we should never think that we're strong. That we're self-sufficient. That we're self-reliant. Because we aren't.

And so this passage in the gospel of Mark points out our human inadequacy to help us see that Jesus came to help us. And so it's meant to drive us to him.

[12 : 22] And that's the first point. The inadequacy of humanity. And so the second point is the sufficiency of Jesus. Because only Jesus can drive out this evil spirit. And the story in Heal the Boy.

Nobody else can do it. It needs Jesus to come on the scene and do the job. And what we see is Jesus is both willing and Jesus is able to cure him.

That's why he orders the boy to be brought to him. Verse 20 says, So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

It's a dramatic scene, isn't it? But what's interesting is that Jesus doesn't heal the boy instantly. In fact, the boy has to get worse before he gets better. Because as soon as the spirit sees Jesus, it throws the boy to the ground.

And if you've been tracking with us in Mark's gospel, we've seen this thing happening. Before, when evil spirits are confronted by Jesus, they go into overdrive. They go absolutely wild and crazy.

[13 : 25] And it's an extreme reaction because the demons know that Jesus has come to defeat them. And so this evil spirit knows that Jesus has authority over it.

And yet rather than deal with the spirit possessing the boy first, what does Jesus do? Jesus takes some time and has a chat with the father about the boy.

And so while the boy is rolling around in the ground, we read 21. Jesus asked the boy's father, how long has he been like this? From childhood, he answered. It has often thrown him into the fire or water to kill him.

But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. And Jesus does have compassion for the boy and his father.

Jesus hears the tragic story of the boy's childhood. Clearly, he's no longer a child here. But in his life, it had been a life of intense suffering. The evil spirit had even tried to destroy him.

[14 : 24] I guess the family could never leave the boy alone in case he burnt or drowned. He had to be on high alert in case anything happened to him. And yet Jesus focuses on the father.

Do you see? 23, if you can, said Jesus, everything is possible for one who believes. So amidst this unbelieving generation, as Jesus has called them, Jesus wants to draw out the father's belief.

And so the issue wasn't Jesus's willingness to heal the boy. Jesus wanted to and could and would. The issue was how much the father believed that Jesus could. That's why Jesus told him, everything is possible for one who believes.

Everything is possible, not because of the quality of someone's belief or faith in Jesus, but because of the one they believe in. So Jesus can do anything.

Jesus was able to help the boy, but the father had to believe that Jesus could. And in his human inadequacy, he has to trust Jesus's sufficiency.

[15 : 33] So the father recognized he didn't have enough faith or belief, but he needed to see that Jesus was the one who could do it. He was only too aware of his lack of belief.

That's why he says, Immediately, the boy's father exclaimed, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. Strange thing for him to say. He was expressing, or he is expressing, that he is a mixture of faith and doubt.

So he's got his doubts about whether his belief in Jesus is actually enough. But in reality, the fact that Jesus does heal this father's son indicates that this man had the kind of faith that Jesus was looking for.

So Jesus wasn't saying he'd help the boy when the father was able to muster up enough faith, as if the quantity or the quality of his faith was the key to getting Jesus to heal him.

In a sense, that would only prove that the father had confidence in himself rather than belief in Jesus. That's not what's going on here. Now, the father is well aware of how small and how inadequate his faith is.

[16 : 46] But for Jesus, that is an indication of true faith. Because this man is so desperate, nobody else can help. Nothing else can help his son.

He's so desperate that he realizes he has to fully and utterly depend on Jesus. And that's why he acknowledges he doesn't have the ability to believe like he should, and he needs help.

He recognizes that he has to fully trust in the sufficiency of Jesus to heal his son. It's Jesus or no one. Only Jesus. And he has to believe in Jesus to be able to do that.

There's no other hope. And so even if he doesn't realize what he's saying, Jesus knows that his faith isn't in himself. His faith is in Jesus.

And his experience here, the father's, teaches us about the nature of true faith in Jesus. True faith means that we are well aware of our own weakness.

[17 : 46] We're well aware of our helplessness. We're well aware even of our unbelief. And yet in our desperation, we are trusting in Jesus. We are believing in him.

We accept our human inadequacy. And we trust Jesus' sufficiency. Just think of it like this. Just imagine that you're falling off a really high cliff. High enough that if you hit the ground, you will go splat and you will die.

And as you're falling off the edge of this massive cliff, you see a branch sticking out to the side of the cliff. And the branch is your only hope of survival.

And the good news is that it's strong enough to take your full weight. It's like a science physics question. This branch can take your full weight. Okay, so the branch is there and it will take your weight.

So how is the branch going to save you? Well, you might be sure in your mind that the branch can support you. But unless you reach out and grab a hold of it, then you'll die.

[18 : 50] Or your mind might be full of doubts about whether the branch can indeed hold you. But if you reach out and grab a hold of it anyway, then you'll be saved.

So what is it that saves you? Well, it's not the strength of your faith in the branch, is it? It's the branch. It's the object of your faith that saves you.

So weak faith in a strong branch is far better than strong faith in a weak branch. And so here's the father and he grabs hold of Jesus.

As it were, he reaches out and grabs hold of Jesus by believing in him. And that's why Jesus didn't wait until he was rid of all his doubts before he saved his boy.

The father knew he needed help in overcoming his unbelief. But the important thing was that his belief, even if he felt it was small, was in Jesus and in nothing else.

[19 : 49] And so we need the same. What saves us is not our human ability, but our belief in Jesus. It's the realization that we will never manage to save ourselves.

And so we have to throw ourselves entirely on Jesus for him to save us. And that's true for coming to faith in Jesus for the first time. We need to realize we've got no hope, but we reach out and grab him.

But it's also true for continuing in faith, for continuing to follow Jesus. Because we don't just need to trust entirely in Jesus to become a Christian. That's how you become one.

But we need to trust in Jesus every single day and in every single way. Believing that Jesus is sufficient for our every single need.

That Jesus does care. That Jesus does know. That Jesus can help. That Jesus is powerful. That Jesus has got this.

[20 : 51] No one else has. Even me. But Jesus has. And so do you recognize your own inadequacy? And do you recognize Jesus's sufficiency to help you?

Because this man's belief is seen in his awareness of his own helplessness. And his need for Jesus to help him. And Jesus does. Verse 25.

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene. He rebuked the impure spirit. You deaf and mute spirit. He said, I command you. Come out of him. And never enter him again. The spirit shrieked.

Convulsed him violently. And came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse. That many said, he's dead. But Jesus took him by the hand. And lifted him to his feet. And he stood up. So Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the boy.

And the spirit did. But it was violent. And it was destructive. And it was as if the boy was dead. In fact, people thought he's dead. He just looks like a corpse on the ground.

[21 : 50] He's going nowhere. And then Jesus literally raised him up. The word that's used here is the word for resurrection. And elsewhere, when this same Greek word is used, it speaks of God raising Jesus from the dead.

And so only resurrection power can defeat the work of Satan and restore life. And that's why this isn't simply a standalone, unique one-off event.

Because Jesus spoke about his resurrection as he came down from the Mount of Transfiguration. Because that was a sign of what's to come. But Jesus also was heading towards his death.

His death on the cross where he would defeat Satan and sin and death. And then he would rise again to life. And so this miracle gives us a preview of the resurrection and the future.

When the dead will be raised by Jesus for everlasting life in the new creation. Where there will be no more suffering, despair, darkness, disease, or death, or evil.

[22 : 53] It will all be gone. And so while we see the sufficiency of Jesus in this incident, can you see how it points to Jesus meeting our deepest needs as human beings and Jesus defeating our greatest enemies, Satan, sin, and death.

And so as we close and as we apply this to ourselves, the point is that we must trust in Jesus, not ourselves. The disciples needed to do this. The Father needed to do this. And so do we trust in Jesus, not in myself.

And the disciples learned this the hard way. Look at the last two verses. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, Why couldn't we drive it out?

He replied, This kind can only come out. Sorry, this kind can come out only by prayer. What did Jesus mean? This kind can come out only by prayer.

Well, it sounds as if the disciples had tried to drive out the evil spirit. In their own strength. Relying on their own human ability. Thinking that they could do it.

[24 : 00] And Jesus' mention of prayer presumably indicates that they thought they could do this themselves. And yet the experience taught them that they were weak and inadequate.

In a spiritual battle, they needed to depend on the power of God and not their own power. And prayer was a way of acknowledging this.

Prayer showed their need to depend on God. It always does. Because isn't that essentially what we do when we pray? In prayer, we are acknowledging to God and before God that we are weak, that we are inadequate, and that we depend entirely on him.

So prayer is vital for all of life because it's a humble expression of our dependence on God. And this is especially so when it comes to serving God in any kind of way, in church or in the world.

Because we don't need to be disciples trying to exercise demons to realize that we've got to depend on God forever. We want to do for him. We need his power to work through us because we can't exercise any kind of ministry in our own strength.

[25 : 12] We are inadequate because any work in Jesus' kingdom is way beyond our human ability. And that's why we must rely on him. And this happens as we engage in prayer.

And so we delude ourselves by thinking that we can have a powerful public ministry. We can be a great missionary. We can be a great Christian at work. We delude ourselves by thinking we can do it without relying on God in prayer.

It won't happen. And even if it happens for a while, it certainly isn't going to last. And so we need to be on guard against the arrogance that relies on our strength and that relies on our strategies.

And perhaps the disciples relied on their past success in driving out demons more than in their present dependence on God in prayer. And we can do the same.

Perhaps by relying on our past achievements and what we've done instead of a present reliance on God right now in prayer. And so what this story teaches us is that we will only ever be of any use to Jesus when we realize that we are no use to Jesus.

[26 : 25] That we can't do it ourselves. When we acknowledge that we are inadequate but Jesus is sufficient. We are weak but Jesus is strong.

And the Father models this perfectly for us. He says, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. He's saying, help me Jesus. Not because of what I am but because of what you are.

Not because I feel my faith is strong but because my faith is in you. And so can you see how this whole episode points us to Jesus?

Showing up our human inadequacy and how it's met by Jesus' sufficiency. Because our human inadequacy means we have got no hope of conquering our greatest enemies.

Satan, sin, death or even simply getting up and facing tomorrow. We have got no hope of doing that ourselves. And yet through the death and the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus has defeated our enemies.

[27 : 30] And Jesus is always there with us. And Jesus is for us. And that's why we so desperately need him. So believe this, my friends.

Jesus is sufficient for you. He's sufficient for me. He's sufficient for life. He's sufficient for death. He's sufficient now. And he's sufficient forever.

Believe in him.