

## “The Consequences of Unbelief”

Luke 9:37-50

The first half of the book of Second Kings records many of the exploits of Elisha. During the reign of King Joram of Israel, the Syrian general, Ben-hadad, besieged the city of Samaria. During that prolonged siege, the famine became so severe that the people resorted to cannibalism in an attempt to survive. II Kings chapter six records the story of two women who agreed to use their own sons as food. They boiled the one woman's son and ate him. However, the next day, the other woman had hidden her son and refused to give him up. So the first woman petitioned the king for help.

Rather than acknowledging this situation as God's judgment on his sin and the sin of the people, Joram blamed Elisha for the siege and the horrible conditions. In his anger, he threatened to behead Elisha, but God prevented him from doing it.

Instead, Elisha went before the king and made an astounding statement. In II Kings 7:1 and 2 we read; “Then Elisha said, “Hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the LORD: ‘Tomorrow about this time a seah of fine flour *shall be sold* for a shekel, and two seahs of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria.’ So an officer on whose hand the king leaned, answered the man of God and said, “Look, *if* the LORD would make windows in heaven, could this thing be?” And he said, “In fact, you shall see *it* with your eyes, but you shall not eat of it.”

The text then informs us how that night, four lepers discovered that the Syrian army camp was empty. God had caused the Syrians to hear the noise of a great army and they fled their camp in panic, leaving everything behind. So the four lepers ate their fill of the abandoned food supplies and then began carrying away plunder. After doing this awhile, they looked at each other and said, “You know, what we're doing isn't right. We really need to let the king know what we've discovered.”

So they shared their discovery with the porter at the gate, and the porter told the king. At first, King Joram thought it was a hoax, to get the people to leave the safety of the city. So he sent out men to find out where the host of Syrians had gone. They discovered that what the lepers had told them was true. The road was full of garments and weapons that the Syrian army had discarded in their headlong flight.

Now, listen to what happened in verses 16 and 17. “Then the people went out and plundered the tents of the Syrians. So a seah of fine flour was *sold* for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the LORD. Now the king had appointed the officer on whose hand he leaned to have charge of the gate. But the people trampled him in the gate, and he died, just as the man of God had said, who spoke when the king came down to him.” God’s Word, spoken by Elisha, was fulfilled exactly as stated.

This is a very graphic example of the consequences of unbelief. This court official died because he did not believe the word of the Lord. In fact, this account in Scripture most likely happened because of another person’s unbelief. Ahab, Joram’s grandfather, had been commanded by God to put Ben-hadad to death, but he did not believe God and refused to obey His command. That’s recorded in First Kings chapter 20. So Ahab’s unbelief led to Joram’s struggle with Ben-hadad

Unbelief is a very serious sin with very serious consequences. In fact, it was the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, the consequences of which we still suffer today.

As we continue our study in the Gospel of Luke, we’ve come to chapter nine and verses 37 to 50. The setting is immediately following the Transfiguration. It contrasts the power and glory of Jesus with the unbelief of men, even of those who profess to be His disciples. I’ve titled our study “The Consequences of Unbelief.”

Listen now as I read the text, Luke 9:37 to 50. Here is God’s Word to us.

In the events recorded in this text we observe several CONSEQUENCES of unbelief.

The First CONSEQUENCE of Unbelief is,

### **Weakened Witness**

The setting of this account is the day after Jesus, Peter, John, and James had been on the Mount of Transfiguration. The three disciples had seen an incredible manifestation of Jesus’ glory and were given a clear command to “hear him.” As they descended the mountain, a great crowd of people met them. In this crowd was a man with a desperate need; his son was possessed by a demon. He had asked the disciples, that would be the nine who weren’t with Jesus on the mountain, to cast the demon out of his son, but they weren’t able to do it.

Mark's gospel records that the nine were being questioned in a hostile manner by the scribes, who already were skeptical of Jesus' claims. You may recall these religious leaders had previously asked Jesus for a sign and He refused to give them one. But here, the nine disciples had taken up the challenge and, in the midst of the multitude, they had failed. Why?

It is interesting to me that before Jesus addresses the father's cries or the son's need, he addresses the crowd, and specifically the nine disciples. And what does he say? The New American Standard translates Jesus' words this way. "*You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you and put up with you?*" Let's unpack Jesus' statement.

First, Jesus stated they were faithless or unbelieving. This seems to be addressed to the crowd in general, but it most likely was directed at the twelve. After all, they had been with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry, yet still failed to believe who He really was. We might think Jesus words seem harsh, in light of the fact that these men had left all to follow Him; but Jesus knew their hearts and could see their lack of complete trust in Him.

Jesus also said they were perverted. This means to twist or make crooked. Their lack of faith had affected others, causing them to turn away from the faith. The verb tense used shows this was an action, completed in the past, which had continuing results. This lack of faith weakened their witness: in the eyes of the common people and especially the religious leaders. Whenever you and I, as God's people, fail to exercise faith in Him we damage God's reputation in the eyes of others; believers and unbelievers alike.

Jesus follows up His statement with the question, "*How long shall I be with you and put up with you?*" There is in this question a mixture of grief and pity; grief that they did not accept Jesus for who He was, and pity for the loss to them and others because of their unbelief.

You see, the unbelief of the people resulted in a warped and twisted view of Jesus' ministry. It also prevented Him from revealing Himself more fully to them. It weakened their witness and His. Matthew chapter 13 tells us that Jesus was not able to do many mighty works in His hometown of Nazareth...because of their unbelief. I believe the same is true for us today. If you and I fail to exercise faith in Jesus, not only do we suffer, but others suffer too.

Now, let's contrast the unbelief and powerlessness of the disciples with the faith and power of Jesus.

First, let's notice that this was a meeting of two "only" sons: the only son of the father pleading with Jesus, and Jesus, the only Son of His Father in Heaven. The desperate father cries out, "*Teacher, I beg you* (and here Luke uses a medical term) *examine my son, my one and only child.*" When you look at all the Gospel accounts of this incident, it appears that the son was most likely an adult. To the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, God said of His Son, "Hear Him." Of his son, in need of a touch from Jesus, the father cried out, "Heal him."

This father then described for Jesus the grievous way in which the demonic spirit afflicted his son. The evil spirit would seize him violently, causing him to cry out. He would then go into convulsions, which included foaming at the mouth. He often suffered bodily injury in the process and the father added, "it scarcely leaves him." So it was an ongoing, terrible existence! For most of us it is impossible to imagine the ongoing trauma of this situation.

The father goes on to say "I begged your disciples to cast (the demon) out, but they could not." The word cast, *ekballo*, means to cast out with violence. This grieving father wanted the disciples to throw the demon out, but they couldn't do it; because they lacked faith.

Then, Jesus addresses the father with a brief command; "Bring your son here." Now the struggle is on! As they were bringing the son, the demonic spirit in him evidently knew his time was short. So, one last time, in protest of his coming eviction, the demon knocked him down and tore him with violent convulsions in the presence of the whole multitude.

Luke simply states that Jesus rebuked, or denounced, the demonic spirit, cured the child, and delivered him to his father. In restoring the son to wholeness, Jesus gave back to this father, the son he had lost in childhood. Can you imagine the depth of gratitude and joy of this father?

And what was the response of the crowd? And they were all astonished at the majesty of God, at the ease with which Jesus had healed this young man. They had seen the disciples try to help, but after repeated tries they had failed.

So the contrast is clear; unbelief weakens our witness. When you and I are faced with difficulties in life and we respond in the power of the flesh, and try to fix the situation ourselves, like unbelievers, then our faith is seen as worthless. How can we convince others to exercise faith in Jesus for salvation when we don't demonstrate faith and trust in Him in the daily choices of life? When we do not take God at His Word and act on His promises we have nothing to offer them. When we face a non-life threatening illness in our family, is our first recourse to call the

doctor or the elders of the church? When we have a financial or practical need is our first thought to borrow the money or do we pray for God's provision? Too many times we never give God the opportunity to meet our needs!

Conversely, when God's power is displayed as it was in this text, people will be astonished at His power and majesty. And they will want you and me to tell them more about Him. So we have a choice: unbelief that weakens our witness, or faith that challenges others to seek God.

The Second CONSEQUENCE of Unbelief is,

### **Inhibited Insight**

If something is inhibited, it is restricted or suppressed. When we do not believe God and take Him at His Word, we limit our ability to understand Him and gain insight into His ways.

Immediately following this incredible demonstration of God's power and the resulting amazement of the people, Jesus turns to the disciples and says; *"Let these words sink into your ears, into your understanding: the Son of Man shall be delivered into the hands of sinners."* The English translation lacks the emphasis of the Greek which we could render as "You, yourselves put these words into your understanding." It is a reinforcement of what they heard on the Mount of Transfiguration – "Hear Him." Incidentally, I checked this out, the word "sink" is nowhere in the text; it is an addition by the translators.

I note just briefly the repetition of the word, delivered. Immediately after healing the demon possessed son, Jesus "delivered" him to his father; he gave him back fully restored. Jesus used the same root word, but with a different prefix, when He stated that He would be delivered into the hands of sinners. There is a sense in which, the reason for His deliverance into the hands of sinners was because of the deliverance He brought to every person who exercised faith in Him. The religious leaders saw they were losing control so, according to Matthew 27:18, they delivered Him because of envy.

Why did Jesus give this prophecy in this setting? Because the crowds and the disciples had certain preconceived ideas about what the Messiah would be like. Jesus' healing of this demon possessed man was the kind of thing they expected from Messiah. They expected an earthly king with an earthly kingdom. In John's record of the feeding of the 5,000 the people

said, *“This is of a truth THAT Prophet that should come into the world.”* Now notice verse 16 of John chapter six; *“When Jesus perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain alone.”*

Later, in this same chapter of John’s gospel Jesus gently rebuked the people for following Him only for personal benefit – for the loaves and fish. When He began to teach them about the true cost of discipleship, many of them turned back and refused to follow Him. So these miraculous demonstrations of God’s power attracted followers, but they were not the primary reason for Jesus’ life and ministry. He wanted them to understand the necessity of the cross in the fulfillment of His calling and theirs.

But what was the response of the Twelve? Look at verse 45. *“But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.”* Of this verse one commentator writes, “They were not allowed to understand the saying then, in order that they might remember it afterwards, and see that Jesus had met His sufferings with full knowledge and free will.”

Their lack of faith made certain aspects of truth unavailable to them. In John 16:12 Jesus said, *“I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all truth...”* We know that later, after the Resurrection, Jesus opened their understanding of things now hidden to them; and the coming of the Holy Spirit completed the process.

Jesus had specifically told them to “put these words into your understanding.” So wasn’t that an invitation to ask Him what He meant about being delivered into the hands of men? If they weren’t sure, why didn’t they ask? Did you notice the last sentence in verse 45? *And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.* Ah, there is the answer to our question. They were afraid.

And why were they afraid to ask Jesus? Well, let me ask this question; “Have you ever been afraid to ask God to open your understanding in some area of Christian living? I have been. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I won’t ask because I have an idea what the answer is; and I know I won’t like the answer! In other words, if I’m ignorant of what God wants, if I can say I don’t know what He requires, then that makes me less responsible; at least in my mind.

So after this great experience the three of them had on Mt. Hermon, seeing Jesus in His glory, they did not want to explore the statement He made about His death. His statement

shattered their hopes and dreams of what the Messianic kingdom would look like. We know they had other things in mind, by what follows in the text.

It reminds me of a single lady I read about who received an investment offer in the mail. It offered an incredible rate of return on her investment. She remembered the old saying “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” Still, the prospect of receiving such a rate of return intrigued her and she thought of all the good she could do with those extra finances. So she quieted that nagging little voice in her head and sent in her check.

Several weeks later the news came out that numerous people in the area had been victims of the same scam. Upset, she went to her pastor with her tale of woe. He said to her, “Why didn’t you come to me before you made the decision to invest in this?” Her response was; “I was afraid you would tell me not to do it; but I really wanted to give it a try.” Now you can say anything you want about that lady, but aren’t we all like that at times? We don’t ask for counsel or understanding because we’re afraid we won’t like the answer!

The apostle, James, understood this and wrote, *“You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”* Yes, we tend to ask for things that benefit our senses, our carnal appetites, but we don’t ask for God to reveal areas of need in our hearts. And this is evident right in this text as we move on to the final consequence of unbelief.

The Final CONSEQUENCE of Unbelief is,

### **Ragged Relationships**

Jesus has just finished reminding His disciples about his impending suffering and death; and what to do they do? They begin to argue about who is going to be the greatest! When we don’t want to think about something or talk about something that goes counter to our own narrative or plans, don’t we often change the subject? That’s what happened here.

It seems clear from this text and others that this “reasoning” was not a friendly conversation where they were trying to resolve some detail of Jesus’ teaching. No, it was a dispute, an argument about their personal status in the group. They wanted to know the “pecking order.” A. T. Robertson writes of this scene, “Rivalries and jealousies had already come and now

sharp words. By and by James and John will be bold enough to ask for the first places for themselves in this political kingdom which they expect. It is a sad spectacle.”

With rivalry and jealousy come harsh and unkind words that lead to ragged relationships; relationships tattered from stress and strain, worn by constant stretching and abrasion. Mark’s gospel records that Jesus asked the disciples about the cause of their dispute. Like sullen children, they refused to answer. They most likely knew that Jesus would be grieved by their prior conversation and their lack of Christ-likeness.

I see the relationship of Jesus and the disciples as a pattern of what would become the Church. I know, the church wasn’t formally established until after Pentecost but Jesus was training these men to become the leaders of that soon to be established church. Jesus chose men from varying backgrounds, with diverse personalities, gifting, and economic status to be His disciples. They represented the diversity that is present in the church – globally and locally. They all needed each other and none was more important than the others. But that wasn’t their view. Too often, it’s not our view either.

We forget the God has a work He has promised to bring to completion our lives, Philippians 1:6. Or, perhaps we know it, but resist it. If we believe God’s promise we will allow Him to speak into our lives through others, even those we consider to be irritating or offensive to us. If we believe Romans 8:28 we can be assured that the people God brings into our lives are His design, part of His plan to perfect in us the character and image of Christ.

The individual desires of the Twelve for prominence brought friction and tension that caused raggedness in their relationships. Instead of following Jesus’ model of self sacrifice and cross-bearing, they were following the model of the Pharisees – wanting the praise and honor of men. It is still the same today. When we reject Jesus teaching about denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily, when we misunderstand and misapply the principles of biblical leadership, we instead focus on ourselves and what we want. And that leads to ragged relationships in our families, in our churches, in our workplace, and beyond.

The disciples refused to answer Jesus’ question about their dispute; but Jesus knew not only what they had been discussing, but what each of them was thinking! And it’s the same for you and me today. We like to think nobody knows about our ambitions or our schemes to move ourselves into a place of prominence; but like the disciples we’re only fooling ourselves.



Notice Jesus' response. He chooses a child from the crowd and draws him or her to His side. This in itself was a pointed object lesson on humility. We know that the Twelve saw children as insignificant. In at least one instance they rebuked the parents who brought their children to Jesus for a blessing. They assumed Jesus was too busy with more important matters than to bless children. Left to themselves, they would've damaged their relationship with the children and their parents – and Jesus' relationship with the same. But Jesus wouldn't allow it.

Then Jesus said, *“Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.”* That's the rendering of the New Revised Standard Version. A welcome is something that is freely given. It springs from a genuine interest in the person or persons who are being received; if someone is received grudgingly or out of obligation, that cannot be defined as a welcome.

What did Jesus really mean by this statement? What does it mean to receive, or welcome, or accept a child? It means to acknowledge them as valuable, as having worth, not because of their accomplishments, or because of the benefit they can bring to you, but simply because they are made in the image and likeness of God! It is the realization and acceptance that God can use those whom we see as the weakest to teach us valuable lessons about Him and about ourselves.

Why is this so hard? It's hard because it goes directly against our human nature. It's hard because, like the Twelve, we refuse to put Jesus' words into our understanding. We know that following these commands will make us misfits in our world, and even among many of our peers. We know what Jesus expects of His followers, but somehow we want to diminish those radical demands. We want the privilege of calling ourselves His followers without the requisite self-denial and cross-bearing. And one result of creating a Jesus we can be comfortable with is ragged relationships.

You know, it's interesting, in Matthew's gospel, how Peter's question on forgiveness follows so closely on the heels of this incident. The wrong attitudes and harsh words stirred up by their jockeying for position created tension and abrasion among them. They needed to learn how to forgive each other and then to serve each other in love. It seems Peter was attempting to be generous when he suggested being willing to forgive seven times. But we know that Jesus' response took him way beyond what he understood as humanly possible.

That Peter eventually learned this lesson we confirm from his words in I Peter 1:22 and 23. “...love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”

Jesus’ concluding statement was “...for the least among all of you is the greatest.” The contrasting Greek words used for least and greatest are *micros* and *meGas*. This is the essence of Jesus’ “upside down kingdom.” Greatness comes through service to others, not by putting myself out in front.

There is in the final two verses of our text another common response we have to truth that makes us uncomfortable – change the subject. This response also results in ragged relationships. We reject the fact that God wants to use the other person to confront us with the claims of truth. We cannot see how God is speaking through them – of all people! We are not willing to discuss the subject at hand and bring the conflict to a proper resolution.

After Jesus makes these convicting statements to the disciples, John pipes up with his words about forbidding anyone who was not part of their group to do God’s work. And again, Jesus patiently reminds John, and the others, that it’s not about them. Those who perform the works of God are for Him, regardless of whether or not they are part of our little group. The Twelve did not have a corner on God or on His truth. Like them, we need to remember this too.

My friend, as you reflect on the varied scenes of this text, what is the Holy Spirit speaking to your heart? Is He speaking confirmation because you are making a sincere attempt to live out kingdom values as a servant to others? I’m not talking about perfection. Even the father of this demonically oppressed man cried out “*Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!*”

Or is the Holy Spirit speaking conviction to you? Have you failed to embrace God’s promises and, in the process, weakened your witness to an unbelieving spouse, or child, or coworker, or neighbor? Have they observed you responding to the difficult situations of life in much the same manner they would? Is your lack of faith preventing God from accomplishing greater things in you and through you?

Have you found your spiritual insight limited because you’re afraid of where obedience to God’s commands may lead you? Have you filled your life so full of activity and noise that you have no quiet moments to put Jesus’ words into your understanding?

And what about your relationships; are they ragged, suffering because of your lack of trusting God to work through others to draw you to Himself? Are their people, especially those you call brother or sister, whom you just can't stand? God may be wanting use those very ones to accomplish His purpose of conforming you to His image. And when God speaks, please don't try to change the subject. Realize that there are many others who sincerely love the Lord and are going about His business, even though they're not part of your group.

The Holy Spirit has spoken to my heart through this text, and I hope you can testify of the same. If so, join me in prayer.

Gracious, loving, Heavenly Father we marvel anew at your patience and forbearance with us. We so desperately need your Holy Spirit present in our lives so we can exercise genuine faith. Father impress upon my heart, and the heart of my friend, how important it is for us to respond in faithful obedience to your Word and to your ways. Teach us how to live like little children; unpretentious, full of faith and welcoming to all those you bring into our lives so we need not experience the tragic consequences of unbelief. I pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.