

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Power for the Powerless**

Mark 9:14-29

Jesus' disciples are a work in progress. When we meet them at the beginning of this morning's Scripture passage, their unfolding mission has hit a snag. They've come up against a demon they can't defeat. As we saw in last Sunday's text, casting out and conquering demons was one of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry. So episodes like this one must have frustrated the disciples and reflected badly on Jesus' kingdom mission.

Soon our Lord himself is caught up in the debate. A desperate dad comes out of the crowd and summarizes the situation. Jesus' disciples have been unable to heal his son. For years, the boy has been captive to an evil spirit that torments him to the point of death. To our contemporary eyes and ears, the symptoms look and sound like seizures that we associate with epilepsy. But remember that our job isn't to sort out what part of the boy's condition belongs to a modern medical diagnosis and what part belongs to a first century understanding of demon possession. What's clear from the story is that the boy is in bondage to and oppressed by a hostile force that opposes God's will for his health and wholeness. And so far, this evil force has proven to be more powerful than Jesus' disciples.

Of course this wouldn't be the first time that followers of Jesus, then and now, have come up against something that's too big for human resources to handle. As we ourselves participate in Jesus' mission in the world, we're constantly encountering and engaging circumstances and situations where redemption, reconciliation, rescue, and restoration can only happen by the Lord's saving power.

In our contemporary setting, one such issue is addiction. I know that's a really broad category, but I'll soon work at narrowing it down for purposes of this sermon. Before I do, though, a good place to begin is with some insights from James Pollard, who says that addiction is "an obsessive or compulsive dependence on a substance, person, or activity, or on a mental or emotional state." Pollard goes on to say, "Addiction is present when a person (1) forms a primary relationship with a substance or activity by surrendering self to the habit, (2) cannot control stopping or starting the activity, and (3) begins to damage self and others."<sup>1</sup>

Though that's a rather textbook, sterile definition of addiction, we can already begin to see how the dynamics of addiction are present in our lives and in the lives of others. That's partly because addiction can take many forms. We often associate addiction with chemicals or substances, and think primarily of drug or alcohol addiction. But the fuller truth is that we can form addictive relationships to all kinds of things. The addiction might be to food, shopping, work, or status. It might be an addiction to gambling, video games, or the internet. It might be an addiction to sex, sports, television, perfectionism, or approval from others.

When we think about addicts, we frequently associate the term with those who are derelict or exist on the margins of society. We're tempted to split the world into good people and bad people, making a clean separation between "addicts" and "non-addicts." But in reality, we're all vulnerable to addictive substances, activities, and patterns of behavior. We're all susceptible to being overpowered and held captive by forces that want to separate us from

God and from one another. So as we approach these kinds of issues and relate to people caught in addictive forms of behavior, we as the church need to follow one person's advice and say, "Let the one who is not an addict cast the first stone."<sup>2</sup>

We're all vulnerable to various forms of addiction. But today I want us to focus particularly on the sad and destructive reality of substance addiction. Within this category, we often think of alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse. And while alcohol and tobacco, without a doubt, pose major risks and dangers, let's especially reflect, with humility and hope, on the harm and pain caused by drug abuse. Some of you may have been through experiences of drug experimentation or drug addiction in your own life. Some of you have family members or friends or coworkers whose lives have been or still are in the grip of drug abuse and chemical dependence. Through these experiences, you know what can happen to a person—body, mind, and soul—when he or she lives in the captivity of substance abuse. You've seen or heard or read about the impact it can have on both them and the people around them. You're no stranger to what substance abuse can do to relationships.

And in our current setting, the scope and impact of substance addiction has widened because of the growing abuse of prescription medications, especially pain relievers. In many cases, this feeds into opioid addiction, which has become an epidemic reaching across lines of class, race, and geography. This in turn often leads into deeper struggles with heroine abuse. One organization reports that four out of five heroin addicts started with prescription opioid medications.<sup>3</sup> As Timothy King has described it:

Our mental picture of an addict should include the high-school honors student who breaks her arm skateboarding and is prescribed an opioid by her doctor.

Or the middle-aged factory worker who has permanent back pain from his job and is prescribed an opioid by his overworked doctor who misses the fact that his patient is severely depressed.

Or think of me. A white, college-educated, employed, middle-class Christian from a good family who grew up on a farm in New Hampshire.<sup>4</sup>

As King points out, within this epidemic of opioid addiction and heroine abuse, there's plenty of blame to go around. Public policy that hasn't been focused on or responsive to the crisis. Doctors that are often overworked and undertrained. Pharmaceutical companies that have misled physicians and the public about the addictive nature of their products. And certainly, the person who is abusing the drug. He or she is still a moral agent responsible for their addictive behavior.

And yet at the same time, we've progressed to a point where we're able to see the drug abuser not just as an individual with moral accountability, but also as a person suffering from a disease. There's now a solid medical consensus about the importance of treating the disease aspect of substance addiction, recognizing the ways that drugs alter the physical and neurochemical structures of the brain and impair a person's resources for doing the right thing. This doesn't completely remove the addict's responsibility for making moral choices, but it does help us see that healing from chemical dependence involves much more than simply telling a person to "Just Say No."

The fact is, our best intentions and boldest words are often no match against the enslaving power of drugs and other addictive substances that can seize control of a person. This is where today's story about the healing of the boy with an evil spirit can inform and shape our response to individuals who are caught in patterns of substance abuse. I'm not saying that the boy in our text is a case of drug or other substance addiction. Clearly he suffers from a different kind of condition and situation. But I am saying that hope for rescue and recovery, then and now, rests ultimately upon the power of the Lord.

In our Scripture passage, Jesus' power to save stands out against his disciples' inability to save. Not that they don't have a part to play. The disciples remain essential to Jesus' mission. After all, Jesus has called them and sent them. Through their own words and deeds, they participate in the liberating, life-giving power of God that has been unleashed in the world. But in this particular case, Jesus says that their faith isn't what it needs to be. Their lack of belief is hindering the effectiveness of their ministry. The boy's father, by contrast, declares his belief. By his own admission, it's imperfect faith. But he's willing to have his faith grow. And Jesus takes what faith the father does have and works through it to free his child from the demon.

In our contemporary battles with the demons of substance addiction, faith is essential. That means not only cultivating faith in the life of the addict by pointing them to Christ and to relationship with God, but also practicing our own faith, however imperfect it may be, by the way we care for them. This means exhibiting our belief in the Lord, and our commitment to his mission, by the ways that we surround them with support and compassion.

Sometimes our compassion will take the form of patient encouragement. Sometimes it will take the form of loving confrontation and a call to repentance. Sometimes it will take the form of providing guidance when the addict's personal judgment and decision-making are corrupted by the effects of their disease. Sometimes our faith will take the form of helping the addict participate in a more intensive program of counseling and rehabilitation. Sometimes it will take the form of helping them get medication-assisted treatment. And always, at all times, our faith will take the form of prayer, for the addict and for ourselves.

Doctor Matthew Loftus writes, "Loving people who have become trapped in biochemical bondage is not easy or cheap, but love never is. And when we use every possible resource God has given us to combat addiction, we also demonstrate the goodness and power of God, who seeks to transform us in every way—even the neurons in our brains."<sup>5</sup>

As followers of Jesus and participants in his ministry, our response to substance abuse needs to be holistic, taking into account body, mind, and soul. More than anything, our response needs to be centered on the good news of God's kingdom, and the liberation it brings to captives, including those in bondage to drugs. Chris Seay tells about a time when he preached about the coming of God's kingdom, and after the service a young man who was coming out of church grabbed him and said,

Pastor, the kingdom [of God] is already here. Every Sunday I used to be in the same neighborhood. I used to come down here to a bar called Emo's, and I'd start every night with a drop of ecstasy on my tongue and wash it down with Bicar di 151. That's what I did Sunday after Sunday. Now I come [to a worship service] instead, and I finish the evening with the body of Christ on my tongue, and I wash it down with the blood of Christ. This is the kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup>

The kingdom is present in Jesus. Upon seeing the powerlessness of his disciples and the crowd's lack of faith, he says, "Bring the boy to me" (v. 19). That's where the deliverance is. That's where the healing is. That's where the power is. It's in Jesus. That's where all of us, with all of our addictions, need to come.

<sup>1</sup> James T. Pollard, "Addiction," in *Handbook of Themes for Preaching*, ed. James W. Cox (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 28-29.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy King, "Just Say No to Shame." *Christianity Today* (December 2016) 38.

<sup>3</sup> From the Society of Addiction Medicine. Cited in King, "Just Say No to Shame," 37.

<sup>4</sup> King, "Just Say No to Shame," 37.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Loftus, "Four Aspects of Recovery." *Christianity Today* (December 2016) 43.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Seay, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011) 22.