The Cure Of Unbelief

By Andrew Murray

"Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief; for verily I say unto you. If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, nothing shall be impossible to you. Howbeit, this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:19-21).

When the disciples saw Jesus cast the evil spirit out of the epileptic whom "they could not cure," they asked the Master for the cause of their failure. He had given them *"power and authority over all devils, and to cure all diseases"* (Luke 9:1). They had often exercised that power and joyfully told how the devils were subject to them. Yet now, while He was on the Mount, they had utterly failed.

That there had been nothing in the will of God or in the nature of the case to render deliverance impossible, had been proved. At Christ's bidding the evil spirit had gone out. From their expression, "Why could we not?" it is evident that they had wished and sought to do so. They had probably used the Master's name, and called upon the evil spirit to go out. Their efforts had been vain, and, in presence of the multitude, they had been put to shame. "Why could we not?"

Christ's answer was direct and plain: "Because of your unbelief." The cause of His success and their failure was not owing to His having a special power to which they had no access. No, the reason was not far to seek. He had so often taught them that there is one power, that of faith, to which, in the kingdom of darkness as in the kingdom of God, everything must bow. In the spiritual world failure has but one cause, the want of faith. Faith is the one condition on which all divine power can enter into man and work through him. It is the susceptibility of the unseen. Man's will yielded up to and molded by the will of God.

The power they had received to cast out devils, they did not hold in themselves as a permanent gift or possession. The power was in Christ to be received and held and used by faith alone, living faith in Himself. Had they been full of faith in Him as Lord and Conqueror in the spirit world, had they been full of faith in Him as having given the authority to cast out in His name, this faith would have given them the victory. "Because of your unbelief" was, for all time, the Master's explanation and reproof of impotence and failure in His church.

But such want of faith may have a cause too. Well might the disciples have asked: "And why could we not believe? Our faith has cast out devils before this: why have we now failed in believing?" The Master proceeds to tell them ere they ask: "This kind goeth out not but by fasting and prayer."

As faith is the simplest, so it is the highest exercise of the spiritual life, where our spirit yields itself in perfect receptivity to God's Spirit, and so is strengthened to its highest activity. This faith

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depends entirely upon the state of the spiritual life. Only when this is strong and in full health, when the Spirit of God has full sway in our life, is there the power of faith to do its mighty deeds. Therefore Jesus adds: “Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by fasting and prayer.” The faith that can overcome such stubborn resistance as you have just seen in this evil spirit, Jesus tells them, is not possible except to men living in very close fellowship with God, and in very special separation from the world – in prayer and fasting.

He teaches us two lessons of deep importance in regard to prayer. The one, that faith needs a life of prayer in which to grow and keep strong. The other that prayer needs fasting for its full and perfect development.

Faith needs a life of prayer for its full growth. In all the different parts of the spiritual life, there is such close union, such unceasing action and reaction, that each may be both cause and effect. Thus it is with faith. There can be no true prayer without faith; some measure of faith must precede prayer. Yet prayer is also the way to more faith. There can be no higher degree of faith except through much prayer. This is the lesson Jesus teaches here.

There is nothing needs so much to grow as our faith. *“Your faith groweth exceedingly,”* is said of one church (1 Thes. 1:3). When Jesus spoke the words, *“According to your faith be it unto you,”* (Matt. 9:29), He announced the law of the kingdom, which tells us that all have not equal degrees of faith, that the same person has not always the same degree, and that the measure of faith must always determine the measure of power and of blessing. If we want to know where and how our faith is to grow, the Master points us to the throne of God. It is in prayer, in the exercise of faith I have, in fellowship with the living God, that faith can increase. Faith can only live by feeding on what is divine, on God Himself.

It is the adoring worship of God, the waiting on Him and for Him, the deep silence of soul that yields itself for God to reveal Himself, that the capacity for knowing and trusting God will be developed. It is as we take His word from the Blessed Book, and bring it to Himself, asking Him to speak it to us with His living, loving voice, that the power will come fully to believe and receive the word as God’s own word to us. It is in prayer, in living contact with God in living faith, that faith – the power to trust God and in that trust to accept everything He says and to accept every possibility He has offered to our faith – will become strong in us.

Many Christians cannot understand what is meant by the much prayer they sometimes hear spoken of. They can form no conception, nor do they feel the need of spending hours with God. But what the Master says, the experience of His people has confirmed: men of strong faith are men of much prayer.

This brings us back again to the lesson we learned when Jesus, before telling us to believe that we receive what we ask, first said, “Have faith in God.” It is God, the living God, into whom our faith must strike its roots deep and broad. Then it will be strong to remove mountains and cast out devils. “If ye have faith… nothing shall be impossible to you.”

If we do but give ourselves up to the work God has for us in the world, coming into contact with the mountains and the devils there are to be cast away and cast out, we should soon comprehend the need there is of much faith, and of much prayer, as the soil in which alone faith

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can be cultivated.

Christ is our life, the life of our faith too. It is His life in us that makes us strong, and makes us simple to believe. It is in dying to self which much prayer implies, in closer union to Jesus that the spirit of faith will come in power. Faith needs prayer for its full growth.

Fasting

The second lesson is that prayer needs fasting for its full growth. Prayer is the one hand with which we grasp the invisible, fasting the other, with which we let loose and cast away the visible. In nothing is man more closely connected with the world of sense than in his need of food, and his enjoyment of it. It was the fruit, good for food, with which man was tempted and fell in Paradise. It was with bread to be made of stones that Jesus, when He hungered, was tempted in the wilderness. It was in fasting that He triumphed.

The body has been redeemed to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. It is in body as well as spirit, it is especially, Scripture says, in eating and drinking that we are to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31). It is to be feared that there are many Christians to whom this eating to the glory of God, has not yet become a spiritual reality. The first thought suggested by Jesus' words in regard to fasting and prayer is that it is only in a life of moderation and temperance and self-denial that there will be the heart or the strength to pray much.

But then there is also its more literal meaning. Sorrow and anxiety cannot eat. Joy celebrates its feasts with eating and drinking. There may come times of intense desire, when it is strongly felt how the body with its appetites, lawful though they be, still hinder the spirit in its battle with the powers of darkness. The need is felt of keeping it under.

We are creatures of the senses. Our mind is helped by what comes to us embodied in concrete form. Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, to seek sacrifice ourselves, to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God. He who accepted the fasting and sacrifice of the Son knows to value and accept and reward with spiritual power the soul that is thus ready to give up all for Christ and His kingdom.

Then follows a still wider application. Prayer is the reaching out after God and the unseen; fasting, the letting go of all that is of the seen and temporal. While ordinary Christians imagine that all that is not positively forbidden and sinful is lawful to them, and seek to retain as much as possible of this world with its property, its literature, its enjoyments – the truly consecrated soul is as the soldier who carries only what he needs for the warfare. Laying aside every weight, as well as the easily besetting sin, afraid of entangling himself with the affairs of this life, he seeks to lead a Nazarite life, as one especially set apart for the Lord and His service. Without such voluntary separation even from what is lawful, no one will attain power in prayer: this kind goeth not out but by fasting and prayer.

Disciples of Jesus who have asked the Master to teach you to pray, come now and accept His lessons. He tells you that prayer is the path to faith, strong faith, that can cast out devils. He tells you: "If ye have faith… nothing shall be impossible to you." Let this glorious promise encourage you to pray much. Is the prize not worth all the price? Shall we not give up all to

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follow Jesus in the path He opens to us here? Shall we not, if need be, fast? Shall we not do anything that would allow the body or the world around to hinder us in our great life work – that of having communion with our God in prayer – that we may become men of faith whom He can use in His work of saving the world?

Blumhardt's Experience

At the time when Blumhardt was passing through his terrible conflict with the evil spirits in those who were possessed, and seeking to cast them out by prayer, he often wondered what it was that hindered the answer. One day a friend to whom he had spoken of his trouble directed his attention to our Lord's words about fasting. Blumhardt resolved to give himself to fasting, sometimes for more than thirty hours. From reflection and experience he gained the conviction that it is of more importance than is generally thought.

He says, "Inasmuch as the fasting is before God, a practical proof that the thing we ask is to us a matter of true and pressing interest, and inasmuch as in a high degree it strengthens the intensity and power of the prayer and becomes the unceasing practical expression of a prayer without words, I could believe that it would not be without efficacy, especially as the Master's words had reference to a case like the present. I tried it without telling anyone, and in truth the latter conflict was extraordinarily lightened by it. I could speak with much greater restfulness and decision. I did not require to be so much present with the sick one; and I felt that I could influence without being present."

O Lord Jesus, how continually Thou hast to reprove us for our unbelief! How strange it must appear to Thee, this terrible incapacity of trusting our Father and His promises. Lord, let Thy reproof with its searching, "Because of your unbelief," sink into the very depths of our hearts, and reveal to us how much of the sin and suffering around is our blame. Then teach us, Blessed Lord, that there is a place where faith can be learned and gained – even in the prayer and fasting that brings into living and abiding fellowship with Thyself and the Father.

O Savior, Thou Thyself art the Author and Perfecter of our faith. Teach us what it is to let Thee live in us by Thy Holy Spirit. Lord, our efforts and prayers for grace to believe have been so unavailing. We know why it was. We sought for strength in ourselves to be given from Thee. Holy Jesus, do at length teach us the mystery of Thy life in us, and how Thou, by Thy Spirit, dost undertake to live in us the life of faith, to see to it that our faith shall not fail. O let us see that our faith will just be a part of that wonderful prayer life which Thou givest in them who expect their training for the ministry of intercession, not in word and thought only, but in the Holy Unction Thou givest, the inflowing of the Spirit of Thine own life. Teach us how, in fasting and prayer, we may grow up to the faith to which nothing shall be impossible. Amen.

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