**God’s Servant Sends**

**Mark 6:1-29**

Think for a moment of the top three spiritual dangers to the health of your soul. What three would you name? Perhaps you would name pride, or greed, or sexual lusts, or anger, or despair. The devil attacks us at so many angles! We are right to be on the alert for each of them. Satan knows that what is effective against our brother may not be effective against us. And what is effective against us may not be effective against our brother. So Satan has diverse schemes and strategies to weaken our spirit and to lead us away from a simple devotion to Christ.

Yet there is one hazard that Satan uses against every person . . . he uses it to bring destruction upon both the redeemed and the unredeemed. This particular threat is common to all men and women. What is that danger? Unbelief.

The unredeemed are completely filled with unbelief and so do not benefit from Jesus’ love for them. Unbelief closes their eyes to see that He alone offers forgiveness of sin and eternal life. **Unbelief for the unredeemed keeps them out of heaven and guarantees an eternity of condemnation.** Faith is the connecting point between us and God’s grace in Jesus. A person whose unbelief is so strong that it keeps them from believing is a person severed from God’s saving love.

Yet the redeemed are also plagued by this disease of unbelief. The redeemed have faith . . . we trust in Jesus as our Messiah and Shepherd. Yet at the same time, while we walk in this present world, we are encumbered with unbelief. **The redeemed are a people filled with faith and with doubt at the same time.**

Like the desperate dad in Mark 9:14, we confess to our Lord, “I believe, help my unbelief!”

Mark 6:1-29 invites us to think upon this subject of unbelief so that we will fortify our faith and defend ourselves against the spiritual assault unbelief presses upon us.

**Unbelief is like a mouse in the winter**. It longs to get out of the cold and into the warmth of our hearts. It seeks any little tiny crevice to squeeze its way in to us. Once inside, it hides so that we do not even notice its presence. But then we open a drawer of trials or of testing and we find the evidence of unbelief in tiny little droppings. The mouse is not harmless. It ruins food. It eats away at pillows, cracker boxes, Dorito bags, plastic containers, and sofa cushions. It stains blankets and cabinets with its urine. It can bring terrible disease to us. Gene Hackman’s wife recently died from breathing air in her home that was poisoned by the rodent-born hantavirus.

For sure, unbelief is MUCH MUCH MUCH MORE dangerous to us than mice. Death by unbelief is much more common than death by the hantavirus.

Mark 6 helps us to busy ourselves setting traps to kill unbelief where it has already entered and to close up those places where it entered in the first place!

Let us begin with a definition:

**Unbelief is an active filter inside of us that interprets all of life in a way that leads us farther and farther from God. Unbelief is the lens through which we see all of life . . . and this lens blinds us to the invisible, eternal reality of God and His workings.**

Unbelief is not simply the absence of faith. Unbelief is the presence of a powerful **operating principle working in our soul. This operating principle** forces our thoughts, our affections, our allegiances, our relationships, our values and our behavior away from the one true God and toward some other god. Unbelief is not a non-entity, but a real presence at work in us. Unbelief is a threat that we must fight or we will be suffer ruin in our soul.

**Main Idea: Unbelief is a lethal enemy to each of us. We must treat it quickly with Gospel medicine whenever we see its symptoms. We must close up the cracks in our soul to keep unbelief out of our hearths.**

**Three lessons that we learn about unbelief from Mark 6:**

**Lesson #1: Unbelief is common at home.**

**Unbelief finds a breeding ground when the sacred becomes familiar. Those privileged with great access to spiritual blessing are tempted to devalue it.**

*He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. Mark 6:1*

Jesus travels from Capernaum to Nazareth. This is about a 20 mile trek to get back home . . . the place where He grew up and lived in the first 30 years of his life. He is going back to the people with whom he went to school with, played games, learned the carpenters’ trade, bought from, sold to, talked, worshipped in synagogue with, celebrated weddings, mourned at funerals. These are people who knew Jesus’ dad, who know His mom and His brothers and sisters. For those 30 years, Jesus did not show His power or His divine nature. Though completely righteous, Jesus did not appear that different from the rest. When Jesus leaves the community to begin His earthly ministry, He begins teaching with authority, He performs miracles, He casts out of demons . . . He did not do any of this over His first 30 years of life when He lived in Nazareth.

**And now, Jesus is coming home.**

*2 And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished,*

When Jesus began teaching, He did not sound like the guy who left Nazareth sometime before. They were astounded, awestruck, overwhelmed by His teaching. **And that positive attention stirred up ridicule among many.**

*2b saying, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?”* ***And they took offense at him.*** *Mark 6:2b-3*

**These are questions meant to accuse and not to explore . . . to denounce and not discover.**

They are not asking these questions because they genuinely want to know more about Jesus. They ask these questions to bring dishonor upon Jesus.

The questions are statements of rejection. *“Remember that he is nothing special . . . just a common laborer! Remember that He was conceived in Mary before Mary and Joseph were married! Look at his brothers and sisters . . . we all know them and there is nothing special about His family.”* All these questions are meant to cast insult and dishonor upon Jesus.

***And they took offense at him.*** They stumbled over Him. They spurned Him. They turned away from Him. They decided that there was no reason to believe Him or to listen to Him any longer.

*4 And Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.” 5 And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.* ***6 And he marveled because of their unbelief.****” (Mark 6:1-6* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Mark_6:1)*)*

To marvel is to be amazed, astonished, surprised, perplexed, speechless. Jesus looked at the unbelief of those with whom he once lived and shook his head in wonder at their unbelief.

This word “marvel” is used only one other time to describe Jesus’ response to a person. In Matthew 8 and Luke 7, Jesus “marvels” at the Gentile centurion who has faith that Jesus can heal a beloved servant. Let me read the account to you because there is a parallel truth that these two stories teach us about faith and about unbelief.

*When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.”*

*And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.”*

*But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”*

***10 When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.*** *11 I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12 while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

*13 And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.” (Matthew 8:5-13* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Matt._8:5)*)*

Notice that **Jesus marvels at this Roman soldier’s faith**.

-This man’s people were not given an everlasting covenant from the LORD.

-This man’s people did not witness the LORD sending miracle after miracle to redeem them from Egypt.

-This man’s people did not experience God’s provision in the wilderness and in battles in the promised land.

-This man’s people were not given God’s commandments from Sinai nor God’s many promises throughout the centuries.

-His people had not been given prophets who spoke the word of God to them.

-His people had not been given the sacrifices and the Temple by which they could approach the LORD.

-This man had no parents read him God’s Word.

-This man had no religious instruction about the Messiah.

**Yet this man, for all of his spiritual poverties and deprivations, believes in Jesus when he sees Him perform miracles and when he hears Him proclaim the Gospel.**

And this man is not alone in the scriptures.God places many examples of people who were given so little spiritual but who responded with such faith and were rewarded. In the OT, we think of Rahab and Ruth. In the New Testament, we think of the thief on the cross or the Roman soldier who helped crucify Jesus.

**Truth: People who are given so little spiritual light are often the very people who exercise marvelous faith. While people who possess great spiritual privileges are the very people who exercise marvelous unbelief. Jesus marvels at both.**

In reference to spiritual privilege, are you more like the Roman centurion or like the people of Nazareth? Are you one to whom God has given so much in reference to spiritual light OR are you one to whom God has given so very little?

**If you are more like the Roman centurion** . . . you grew up in a home where you did not hear the Gospel . . . you were not instructed in the scriptures . . . you did not hear anyone pray for you or with you . . . you did not see anyone baptized or hear people share their testimony . . . you did not attend any worship service where you heard God’s people sing in joy to their Savior . . . nor did not hear a Sunday school teacher or a pastor proclaim the grace of God to you. **If you are like the Roman centurion, I tell you, . . .**

**Truth: The lack of spiritual privilege does not hinder anyone from receiving the full blessing of God’s salvation that is found in Jesus.**

Little light is not a sign that God does not love you. He opens His arms to fiully embrace all who come to Him in faith.

Jesus marvels at the Roman soldier’s faith and He blesses the soldier by healing his beloved servant.

**If you are more like the people of Nazareth . . .** you grew up in a home where your parents taught you the Gospel . . . you listened to Bible story after Bible story . . . you heard many people share testimonies of God’s transforming grace in their lives . . . you participated in singing songs with God’s assembly . . . you had faithful church leaders love you and teach you the scriptures. **If you are like the people of Nazareth, I tell you,** . . .

**Truth: Spiritual privilege can become spiritual danger if we do not at once humbly repent under its influence.**

**Spiritual advantage is no advantage to those who refuse to receive it by faith. In fact, spiritual advantage becomes a disadvantage on the day of judgment for those who turn from it in self-will.**

*“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! (Jewish cities) For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon (Gentile cities), they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”” (Matthew 11:21-24* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Matt._11:21)*)*

**Familiarity with Jesus without submission to Jesus invites unbelief into our hearts. And unbelief invites eternal suffering upon us.**

Friends, let us humbly respond to every spiritual grace that the LORD provides to us! Let us not be hardened by the light that God gives to soften us.

***Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart,*** *leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” (Hebrews 3:12-13* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Heb._3:12)*)*

*And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?* ***So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.”*** *(Hebrews 3:18-19* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Heb._3:18)*)*

What terrible impact unbelief has upon us! Jesus is present in Nazareth! He is ready and willing to do the miracles he has done in Israel.

**When unbelief operates in the human heart, no amount of truth will move our heart to faith.**

*5 And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.*

**Unbelief possesses the power to rob us of God’s blessing and miracles.**

Friends, we can never guard our hearts against unbelief too strongly! Unbelief will make us turn from the plainest evidence and to shut our ears to the clearest testimony that God gives us. We do not lack for evidence. We lack the will to turn from our sin. We are too tied to this world. We are too willful to bow our knee to Jesus as our Lord and Master.

*Let us go on watching our hearts, even after we have believed. The root of unbelief is never entirely destroyed. We have only to leave off watching and praying, and a rank crop of unbelief will soon spring up. No prayer is so important as that of the disciples, “Lord, increase our faith.” J. C. Ryle*

**Main Idea: Unbelief is a lethal enemy to each of us. We must treat it quickly with Gospel medicine whenever we see its symptoms. We must close up the cracks in our soul to keep unbelief out of our hearths.**

**Lesson #2: Unbelief is contested by God’s mission.**

*7 And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.8 He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts— 9 but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. 10 And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. 11* ***And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” 12 So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent.*** *13 And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.” (Mark 6:7-13* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Mark_6:7)*)*

Notice how Jesus anticipates unbelief in those to whom He sends His disciples.

***11 And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”***

The exact same message of God’s Gospel . . . good news from heaven brings life to some and death to others. If the message itself is not the thing that creates such disparate impact, what else explains how some respond with joy and others with disgust or with apathy? Answer: The heart of the hearers. One person hears with the operating principle of unbelief shaping the response. Another person hears the exact same message at the exact same time with the operating principle of faith shaping the response. Unbelief invites God’s condemnation. Faith invites God’s grace.

Notice Jesus’ words to His disciples: *11 And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet* ***as a testimony against them.”***

Unbelief is a willful rejection of God’s grace and so God is just to turn away from those who turn from Him.

***“The same sun which melts wax hardens clay. And the same Gospel which melts some persons to repentance hardens others in their sins.” -Charles Spurgeon***

The apostle Paul helps us to understand why people have such opposite responses to the Gospel.

*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:3-4* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._4:3)*)*

Satan acts to promote unbelief knowing that without faith, no one is able to see God and His goodness in the Gospel.

Having told us why some hear the Gospel of Jesus and turn from it, Paul then explains why some hear the Gospel of Jesus and rejoice in it.

*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:5-6* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._4:5)*)*

**This paragraph in Mark 6 helps us to understand Jesus’ strategy to contest and combat unbelief.**

Jesus first proclaims the Gospel to these disciples . . . calling them to repent of sin and to believe in Him. That is **the first step** to combatting unbelief in our hearts.

**The second step** is that Jesus sends His disciples out into the world to proclaim the same message that He proclaimed to them.

**Question: What can we do to fight unbelief?** The Bible has a number of answers to that question. But here Jesus emphasizes two key actions of our heart.

**Action #1: Repent of your sin and believe the Gospel.**

***So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. 6:12***

Jesus points us to the necessity of repentance . . . of turning from our sin and turning to Him in faith.

Repentance opens the window of our soul to let the light of Jesus shine in us. Without repentance we are left in the darkness of our sin. And when the Spirit of God convicts us of sin and we walk away without repenting, unbelief becomes even stronger in our life . . . we shut ourselves more and more from the light of God to help us experience true life.

There is a pattern that I have witnessed often in the lives of those who profess Jesus . . .

1. A believer succumbs to temptation to a sin . . . the sin is varied . . . it might be pornography . . . or drunkenness . . . or bitterness toward a spouse . . . or the love of money.
2. The Holy Spirit alerts the believer to the presence of sin and calls him/her to repent.
3. The believer does not repent.
4. Unbelief grows in the heart of the believer.
5. As unbelief grows, the sin takes deeper root.
6. As the sin takes deeper root, unbelief grows more and more.
7. Soon the believer no longer experiences joy in fellowship with God or God’s people . . . the believer begins to question the truth of God’s Word . . .
8. The believer decides upon a course that their earlier self would not have imagined possible. Faith becomes so weak that its pulse cannot be detected.

How does this happen? Unbelief becomes the filter . . . the operating principle in the life of anyone who is convicted by the Holy Spirit of sin and refuses to act in repentance. When we refuse to repent of the sin that the Holy Spirit reveals to us, we invite unbelief into our hearts. And unbelief blinds us and will take us to depths of darkness that we cannot fathom.

The Gospel of Jesus is a Gospel of repentance . . . a call to turn from self and turn to Jesus as Lord and Master

Repent once to receive His Spirit and repent every day to walk by His Spirit.

**Action #1: Repent of your sin and believe the Gospel.**

**Action #2: Proclaim the Gospel to others.**

Here Jesus shows us His method to contest the dominance of unbelief . . . both in the hearts of the people and in the hearts of His disciples.

Jesus loves to help His own overcome unbelief in our hearts. He is sufficient in this fight!

**Turn page to Mark 9:14-22.** The story of the man whose son is being destroyed by a demon. The disciples are not able to cast out the demon. Jesus uses this ministry failure as a teaching lesson to grow in faith!

*“And he answered them, “O* ***faithless*** *(unbelieving) generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.”” (Mark 9:19* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Mark_9:19)*)*

*“And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him****. But if you can do anything,*** *have compassion on us and help us.”” (Mark 9:22* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Mark_9:22)*)*

*“And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.”” (Mark 9:23* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Mark_9:23)*)*

**Jesus confronts the unbelief in this emotionally distraught man.** Why? Is Jesus unsympathetic to this man’s grief and anguish? No. Jesus is ministering the medicine this man needs for his own heart and to help his son. Jesus knows that the biggest problem in this man’s life is his unbelief.

*Immediately the father of the child cried out and said,* ***“I believe; help my unbelief!”*** *And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out,” (Mark 9:24-26* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Mark_9:24)*)*

**Main Idea: Unbelief is a lethal enemy to each of us. We must treat it quickly with Gospel medicine whenever we see its symptoms. We must close up the cracks in our soul to keep unbelief out of our hearths.**

**Lesson #3: Unbelief is cultivated by God’s confrontation.**

So much complexity to this story, but here is the short version.

Both Herod Antipas and Herodias are married to other people when they meet. They both divorce their spouses in order to get together with each other. God sends John the Baptist to tell Herod, “It is not lawful to have your brother’s wife.” He does not tell Herod this once or twice . . . but over and over and over. He does not say this in private, but since this is a public sin, John confronts Herod publicly.

Herodias is enraged! She convinces Herod to arrest John. He does. She keeps trying to get Herod to execute John, Herod does not. For two reasons, one is that he has some fear of God in him. And two . . . he has some fear of man . . . John is popular with the people Herod governs.

Herod throws a party . . . a wild, drunken, sensuous party. Herodias’ daughter dances a sensual dance and everyone claps. Herod publicly says to the girl*, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.”” (Mark 6:22* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Mark_6:22)*).* She goes to her mom. Herodias says, “Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” She is cruel hearted and cold . . . unbelief has robbed her of moral feeling.

Herod does not want to embarrass himself by going back on his word. He cares what people think more than what God thinks. So he does it.

*“When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.” (Mark 6:29* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Mark_6:29)*)*

Unbelief has so many faces. This story unveils three of those faces as we learn about Herod and Herodias and Herodias’ daughter.

In Herod, unbelief takes the form of wanting to please people more than God.

In Herodias, unbelief takes the form of evil malice toward God.

In Herodias’ daughter, unbelief takes the form of sensuality and cruelty.

But in all three, unbelief is the root problem.

Much to learn here, but I focus on one lesson this story teaches us about unbelief.

When God confronts us, we move in one of two directions. We move deeper into self-will and self-determination. We move in humility into repentance and faith. We either become hardened in our sin or we become soft to the Spirit.

*Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.*

*Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.” (Proverbs 9:7-8* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Prov._9:7)*)*

**Truth: Unbelief often blossoms in the soil of God’s confrontation.**

God’s confrontation of our sin will always impact us . . . God intends the confrontation to bend us in humility toward repentance and faith. But Satan is also working to bend us in pride toward resentment and coldness toward God and His righteous standards for our lives.

Question: Is God confronting you about any specific sin in your life? If so, how are you responding? Are you growing softer toward His Spirit and bending your will to Him? **If so, thank God for His work of grace in your life. Keep bending low to Him.**

Or are you growing resentful of the confrontation? Are you avoiding the subject or justifying your sin? If so, tremble for your own soul. You are swimming in a current over which you have no power. You are becoming more and more powerless to avoid the destructive waterfall that lies ahead of you.

**Conclusion:**

Began “Unbelief is like a mouse in winter.” Do you have a mouse in your house?

Three times the writer of Hebrews quotes Ps 95:

*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,” (Hebrews 3:7-8* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Heb._3:7)*)*

*For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.””*

*(Hebrews 3:14-15* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Heb._3:14)*)*

*“again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David . . . , in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”” (Hebrews 4:7* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Heb._4:7)*)*

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