

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

## NEEDY PEOPLE, MIGHTY GOD

Luke 9:37-45

By

Steven J. Cole

December 13, 1998

© Steven J. Cole, 1998

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

December 13, 1998  
Luke Lesson 46

Needy People, Mighty God  
Luke 9:37-45

A recent *Reader's Digest* cover story was about some distraught parents whose 11 year-old son had two serious brain tumors that soon would have taken his life. They managed to get in touch with one of the most skilled neurosurgeons in the world, who was able to operate and restore the boy to health. The cover picture of the doctor with the smiling, healthy boy is enough to make you want to be a neurosurgeon. A story like that touches us. I remember watching a movie in college about a heart surgeon who repaired a hole in the heart of a four-year-old girl. That movie almost persuaded me to go into medicine as a career.

That is the scene we encounter in our text. Jesus, Peter, John, and James come down from the Mount of Transfiguration to encounter a great multitude. Out of that crowd, one man shouts out, begging Jesus to look at his only son who is plagued by a disease similar to epilepsy. But it is more than mere epilepsy: a demon was exploiting the physical disease and making it much worse. The distraught father had entreated the nine disciples who had not accompanied Jesus onto the mountain, but they could not cast out the demon.

What a stark contrast between the majesty on the mountain and the mess on the plain! Peter, John, and James had just seen Jesus in all His glory, talking with Moses and Elijah in glory. They had been enveloped by the cloud and had heard God's voice! Now they encounter a thronging mob of needy people, with this pathetic man and his convulsing son at the forefront. Mark 9:14 adds that the scribes were arguing with the disciples over the situation. They were probably using the disciples' failure to argue that Jesus Himself was lacking in power. While they dispute, this poor, helpless father and his desperately needy son plead for help. What a scene!

Luke leaves out many touching details that the other gospels include. He doesn't mention the father's pathetic appeal, "If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" or Jesus' reply, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." To this the

father gave that reply that all of us have often used, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:22-24). Luke also omits the disciples' subsequent discussion with Jesus in which He explains, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer" (Mark 9:29).

Rather, Luke's focus is on the failure of the disciples (the next two incidents also reveal the disciples' need to learn and grow) and on God's mighty power. Also, Luke links the crowd's elation over the healing with Jesus' prediction of His death and the disciples' inability to understand what He was talking about. The overall picture is that even though the disciples are incompetent and in the dark at this point, Jesus is fully in command. He is not taken in by the fickle adulation of the crowd. He knows what He is doing and where He is headed, namely, to the cross. The lesson for us is, ...

In our great need we can lay hold of God's  
mighty power through faith.

We see four strands that tie this story together: the desperate need of people; the destructive power of the enemy; the mighty power of God to deliver from the enemy; and, our vital need for faith and obedience to lay hold of God's power.

1. The desperate need of people:

Because the human race is under the curse of sin and death, which stems from the fall, we all are desperately needy. Some try to mask their neediness by giving off an aura of confidence and competence. Others may be blinded to their need by their youthfulness, their health, or their financial security. But the fact is, every human being is fragile. We are a heartbeat away from eternity. Our health, our wealth, our loved ones, and our very lives can be taken in an instant. We see here three groups of needy people:

*\*The distraught father and his debilitated son:* "Teacher, I beg You to look at my son, for he is my only boy." Every parent can relate to this man's pathetic cry for help. Our hearts go out for our children, especially when they have a debilitating illness or problem that we cannot resolve. Mark 9:21 reports that Jesus asked this father how long the boy had suffered from this problem and the father replied, "From childhood." Probably the boy was a young teenager now. Other boys his age were learning a trade and begin-

ning to look toward the responsibilities of manhood. But this boy's life was being ruined by Satan.

This demon was destroying the boy physically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. The symptoms were similar to epilepsy, plus a loss of speech (Mark 9:17). But the problem was not just neurological; it was also demonic. Frankly, it's often difficult to sort out the physiological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person's problems, especially if the person is using drugs. Drug use is at root a spiritual problem, but it also affects the person's physiology and moods, so that the whole problem gets mixed up together.

Problems like this wreak havoc on the whole family. The family becomes defined by their problem. Others describe them as "the family with the demonic son." Often others in the community feel uncomfortable being around them and so they avoid them. Certainly, they don't want their children playing with a boy like this. Who knows what might happen? It might rub off on their children or the crazy kid might erupt in a fit of rage and harm or kill their children. It's just better to keep your distance.

For the family with a boy like this, life centers on "the problem." Every minute of every day the boy had to be watched for fear that he would have a violent seizure that would throw him into the fire or water where he could be killed. If the father had to attend to his work, the mother had to be on duty. She had to try to get the household chores done with this boy in tow. If she went to the marketplace, she was afraid that he would have a seizure there, and she would be a spectacle in front of the whole town.

Did you know that 80 percent of couples who have a handicapped child or whose child dies cannot handle the pressure and end their marriages in divorce? As a church family, we need to be sensitive to families that have problem children—be it physical, emotional, or spiritual problems—and surround them with the love of Christ. We need to listen without condemnation and we need to help in practical ways. This distraught father and his debilitated son show us one aspect of our desperate need before God.

*\*The deficient disciples:* "They could not" cast out the demon and, "they did not understand" Jesus' statement. In other words, the disciples were lacking in spiritual power and they were lacking

in spiritual understanding. In these ways, they show us further aspects of our neediness before God. All of us face situations, either with loved ones or personally, where if we could, we would speak the word and deliver the loved one or ourselves from some overwhelming problem. But, the fact is, we can't! We attend seminars, we spend a fortune on counselors, we read the latest books, we try so-called "proven" techniques. But the problems don't budge. We lack the spiritual power to overcome them.

We also often lack spiritual understanding. Just when the multitudes are raving about Jesus and His mighty works, He drops the news on the disciples like a bomb: "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men" (9:44). But they just didn't get it. In fact, Luke tells us that it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it, implying that God concealed it from them.

From our vantage point, their dullness seems incredible. But it's easy to play armchair quarterback! From their vantage point, Jesus was riding a wave of popularity. They thought Messiah would be the conquering king, triumphant over all His enemies. They had not figured out that Messiah had to come the first time to die for the sins of His people and that He will come again to reign in power and glory. So the notion of a rejected and killed Messiah was utterly incomprehensible to them.

The disciples' lack of spiritual understanding shows us our need to depend totally on God for spiritual insight and truth. Many times I have gotten off track with some subtle spiritual error. At the time, I would have told you that I was right on target. Then God opened my eyes and I saw how far I had strayed. It's so easy to get swept downstream with the spiritual climate of the day. That is one reason I find it helpful to read some of the great men of God from the past. They may have their own quirks, but they are outside of the quirks of our age and so they often help me to see the errors of our time more clearly. That leads to the third group that shows us our need before God:

*\*The defective generation:* "O unbelieving and perverted generation!" Jesus is echoing Moses' words about the generation that fell in the wilderness (Deut. 32:5). Perhaps after just communing with Moses and Elijah on the mountain and discussing His own im-

pending departure, Jesus was especially aware of how far this generation was from God. There is debate about to whom Jesus is directing this rebuke. In light of the mention of the disciples' failure (9:40), they would seem to be at the forefront. But it is a broad rebuke that also takes in the religious leaders and the multitude. That entire generation would soon reject and kill their Messiah. In that sense they were unbelieving and perverted.

Every generation has its own spiritual perversions. My grandparents' generation was marked by a cultural Christianity that was a nice part of life, but it didn't seem to penetrate down to how a person lived in the family and in society. My parents' generation went through the depression and the war. They sought to overcome these problems through material prosperity. My generation rebelled against what they saw as hypocrisy and superficiality. We wanted to be real, to not play games, to live by our feelings. The current "Generation X" thinks that they're going to solve the world's problems through technology and by rewriting the rules without regard for God. As Christians, we would like to think that we are independent thinkers who are not influenced by our generation. But, the fact is, we are often like fish in the water that don't know that they are wet. We live in an unbelieving and perverted generation and this shows us our desperate need for God.

## 2. The destructive power of the enemy:

The Bible teaches that evil is not just an impersonal force, but rather it exists and is furthered through Satan and the demons, who are personal spiritual beings. While Satan is a deceiver who often draws people into his web by promising them what they desire, his goal is to harm and destroy. Jesus' told the disciples that "this kind" of demon is more difficult to remove than others (Mark 9:29), which indicates that some demons are more powerful than others. There is no indication that this boy or his parents had done something to open the boy to demonic power. Apparently, it was something God permitted to drive this family to Christ.

While most of our problems are due to the flesh, not directly to demons, we need to be on guard against the terrible destructive power of Satan. As I understand it, demons cannot possess a believer, but they can plague and harass believers.

Be careful to do nothing to open the door to demonic power. Get rid of any occult paraphernalia. Destroy Ouija boards. Do not consult horoscopes or fortune tellers. Do not watch movies or read books that deal with satanic themes. Do not read accounts about Satan worshipers. We should not be naïve: we face an enemy who is far more powerful and cunning than we are. We should not fear him because our God is more powerful. But neither should we underestimate his power! The destructive power of the enemy further underscores our desperate need for God.

3. The mighty power of God in Christ to deliver us:

If this were a fairy story, it would embellish and emphasize the manner in which Jesus delivered and healed this boy. But Luke almost understates the healing itself. He describes the boy's terrible convulsions in detail, but then simply states, "Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father" (9:42). Then he clarifies what happened by showing the reaction of the crowd: "They were all amazed at the greatness of God" (9:43). The good news is that, "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Or, as Jesus says to this distraught father (in Mark 9:23), "All things are possible to him who believes."

That is one of those statements that we all believe in theory, but it becomes increasingly difficult to believe in practice the more we think about it. If God's power is so great that all things are possible to believers, then why is there so much pain and suffering in this world? Why do so many good people suffer while evil people prosper? Why do stubborn family problems and divorce abound, even in Christian families? Why don't hospitals go out of business and police departments and armies dissolve from lack of need, if God's mighty power is available to His people?

It would be wrong to take Jesus' words further than He Himself meant them. Obviously, the "all things" means "all things within the will of God." And we must affirm that in the present age, the will of God in its broadest sense includes the presence of evil and suffering. If the "all things" ever applied to anyone, it applied to Jesus. And yet He did not use the mighty power of God to

escape the cross. In fact, He affirms the cross in this very context (9:44).

Also, it is easy to mistake our will for God's will, even when we think we're following God. For example, if you knew of a godly, powerful young evangelist whose messages were turning many to God, you would not think it to be God's will for him to be cut down after less than a year's ministry. Yet, that is precisely what happened to John the Baptist. For some reason, it was God's will a few years later to deliver Peter from prison and extend his life, but it was not God's will to deliver James, who was killed by Herod. Why James and why not Peter? No one can answer that question. But when it was God's will to deliver Peter, the most secure prison and the strongest guards were no match for God's power. But we need to be careful not to claim that we know with certainty in advance how God will act, because we are prone to be mistaken.

But when it is God's will to work, His power is greater than any other power. His power is greater than any problem we face. God often does not deliver us instantly or miraculously, because we need to learn to walk by faith. Sometimes He doesn't deliver us at all, for reasons in His sovereign will that we don't understand. But we must call out to God in faith and trust His power that is available to us through Christ. As Jeremiah prayed when Nebuchadnezzar's army was besieging Jerusalem: "Ah, Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You" (Jer. 32:17).

While this is a story about God's ability to deliver this boy from this demon and from disease, it also pictures God's power to save the most difficult people from Satan's domain. If we had heaven's perspective, we would realize that it is a far greater miracle for Jesus Christ to save a lost sinner from Satan's power than it is for Him to heal someone from a physical ailment. Physical healing is only a temporary extension of life, but spiritual deliverance goes on for eternity. Our earthbound minds hear of a miracle of physical healing and marvel. But the angels in heaven marvel over a soul saved from hell. If we would see this, we would spend more time entreating God for His greater miracles of saving lost people and

less time praying for miracles to make us more comfortable. If you are in bondage to sin and to Satan, if you will call upon the Lord Jesus Christ, He will save you by His grace.

We have seen our great need; the enemy's destructive power; and God's greater power in Jesus Christ. The final element is,

#### 4. The vital need for faith and obedience:

The need for faith is indicated in Jesus' rebuke, "O *unbelieving* generation!" Matthew reports that the disciples asked Jesus privately why they could not cast out this demon and He replied, "Because of the littleness of your faith" (Matt. 17:20). True faith always is inseparable from obedience, which is implied when Jesus calls them a "*perverted* generation!" To be perverted is to go astray from the path of God's righteous ways as revealed in His Word. We cannot rightly claim to be trusting God if we are knowingly disobeying His Word.

This father was trying to believe, although he was quick to acknowledge his shortcoming by crying out, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). But he shows us what every parent should do when troubled about his children, namely, bring them to Jesus. That's what we all should do with all our problems and needs: bring them to Jesus. Bring them to Him as often as you need to, because He invites us to cast all our cares on Him (1 Pet. 5:7). Bring them to Him believing that He is able to do far more than we can ask or even think (Eph. 3:20). As you bring your needs to Him, examine your life, beginning on the thought level, to see if there is anything displeasing to Him. Confess and turn from any known sin and seek Him for grace to grow in holiness in thought and deed.

This story should encourage us to bring our problems to the Lord because He is gracious to work on our behalf even when our faith is weak and our understanding is misdirected. He didn't wait until this father had great faith to deliver his son. He didn't wait until the disciples arrived at strong faith and crystal clear understanding before He used them in His purpose. He is full of compassion and mercy. If we bring our troubles and problems to Him, even though our faith may be weak and our understanding may be cloudy, He is often gracious to deliver us by His mighty power.

## Conclusion

Years ago a seagoing captain had his family on board as his ship crossed from England to America. One night, when everyone was asleep, a sudden squall hit and the ship rocked violently. The passengers woke up, frightened by the storm. The captain's eight-year-old daughter also woke up. At first she was scared as she asked her mother what was happening. Her mother explained that there was a sudden storm. The girl asked, "Is father on deck?" "Yes," her mother replied, "father is on deck." Hearing this, the little girl snuggled back under her covers and in a few minutes was sound asleep. The winds still blew and the waves still hit the ship, but she could rest peacefully because she knew her father was at the helm (in "Our Daily Bread," 1985).

Whatever our needs and however strong the enemy, we know that our Heavenly Father is even more powerful. Even if we face death itself, we know that our mighty Savior went to the cross and was victorious over sin and death there. In our great need, we can lay hold of God's mighty power through faith. If this distraught father had not had this problem with his son, he might never have trusted in the Lord Jesus. While the problem was not pleasant, it was the means that God used to deliver the man from that unbelieving and perverted generation. If you let your problems drive you to Christ, you also will be delivered from this unbelieving and perverted generation. We are needy people, but Christ is a mighty Savior!

## Discussion Questions

1. Can we know God's will concerning a problem in advance? Is it a cop out to pray, "Your will be done"?
2. How can you sort out what part of a problem is spiritual and what part is emotional or physical? Does it matter?
3. How can we tell whether the source of a problem is demonic or from the flesh? How would you deal with each?
4. How can we know whether to keep praying and trusting when God delays resolving a problem?

Copyright, 1998, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.