

A VISION FOR EVERYONE

Discussion Guide

Becoming God's People: Matthew 17.14-20

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- o Describe a time when you got stuck.
- o Optional: What, if anything from the sermon, encouraged, challenged, or really made you think?

Setting the Stage: *Sometimes we get stuck. We head off to tackle an endeavor, something God is leading us to do, maybe something we have done before but somehow we get stuck. To put it plainly, we fail. We fail in ministry. We fail to see God's power flow through us as it should, as it has before, and we are baffled and just a little ashamed. It shouldn't be this way, but it is. So what happened? What went wrong? Is the problem with God, or could the problem lie in me? The later is more likely, but the answer is elusive. What got me stuck and what can I do about it? At least I am not the only one to ever ask this question. The first disciples asked the same question, and Jesus answered it. So maybe the bottom line is am I willing to wrestle with what Jesus says? Am I willing to do what Jesus says it takes to get unstuck?*

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes (The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read Matthew 17.14-20 (Leader note: *You may consider reading Mark 9.14-28 for additional context*).
- In what ways do the disciples get stuck? (*Look through the text to find as many instances as possible.*)
- What seems to be at issue in these instances?
- How does Jesus encourage the disciples to get "unstuck?" What might Jesus' encouragement look like in real life? (Leader note: *Look to the group notes, particularly to the application section for additional information.*)
- In what ways, if any, do you see followers of Jesus getting stuck like the first disciples?
- Do you think Jesus' evaluation might still apply to these instances? Can you elaborate?
- Have you ever gotten stuck like these first disciples? What happened? How did it feel?
- How might Jesus' evaluation explain your experience of getting stuck?
- What practical steps might you consider taking to ensure that you don't get stuck in the future? Which of these might you be willing to take this week?

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- o Prayer requests
- o Group prayer time
- o House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)

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Group Notes

Becoming God's People: Discussion Guide

Matthew 17.14-20

Context and Background

Healing and the Gospel: Healing was central to Jesus' ministry. While one might view Jesus' acts of healing as supplemental to his ministry, healing was actually central to Jesus' ministry and message. Jesus' ministry was one of gospel proclamation (Mark 1.14-15). According to Mark, the message of the gospel is nothing other than the announcement that God's kingdom/reign had arrived. This announcement implies the presence of other opposing kingdoms in the world and their removal by God's arriving kingdom. The removal or replacement of existing kingdoms by God's kingdom naturally leads to the ending of the power of the former kingdoms over the lives of people. Thus, God's kingdom brings freedom from the oppression of former kingdoms. According to Jesus, this bringing of freedom was partly demonstrated by the granting of freedom from sickness as this was one form of the oppression of existing kingdoms (Luke 4.14-20; See also Paul's description of freedom from the oppression of existing kingdoms in Eph. 2.1-10 and Rom. 8.1-17). Thus, healing was a physical and tangible demonstration of the truth of Jesus' message that God's kingdom was arriving. His healings were irrefutable displays of God's kingdom driving out the kingdom of Satan in the lives of people. Not only was healing a demonstration of the arrival of God's kingdom but it was the physical experience of God's kingdom in the lives of those healed. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Jesus instructed his disciples that healing should play a significant role in their gospel ministry as such healing provided people with the experience and proof of their message (Matt. 10.1-8). The central role of healing in Jesus' ministry reminds us that the message of the gospel has tangible effects in life. The arrival of God's kingdom brings freedom from the oppression of Satan's kingdom in the lives of those who accept God's reign. While this freedom can at times bring physical healing from disease—those diseases that are the work of Satan—the gospel promises to bring freedom from all forms of oppression in one's life such as addiction, mental anguish, and relational brokenness. Healing is simply part of the gospel, a physical demonstration and experience of the arrival of God's reign in our lives. The ignoring of healing as a normal outworking of the gospel is actually a refutation of the central idea of the gospel itself (Luke 4.14-20).

Faith/Unbelief (no faith): Faith in the ancient world denoted the trust that someone placed in other people or in the gods. In religious contexts, the term was used to refer to human obedience to the will of the gods. Such obedience was rooted in the abandonment of one's life to and the ordering of such around a deity. In the New Testament, the word "faith"—often translated as "belief"—is used to refer to a trust in God that leads to the ordering of one's life around His. Such faith is centered on the person of Jesus. Thus faith in God is expressed as trust in and an ordering of one's life around Jesus. True faith is seen as one opens their life to the work of God through the person of Jesus. Conversely, a lack of faith/unbelief is a closing of one's life to the movement of God in Jesus. To have a lack of faith is to mistrust or seek to limit God's power and movement. Such mistrust can be engendered in various ways. However, in general, mistrust in the NT seems to result in one not being open to the possibilities that God presents in Jesus (Mark 11.12-25). That is, a lack of faith is a closing of one's life to the power and movement of God.

The Text

A ministry failure (Matthew 17.14-18): In the text, Jesus has just taken three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, to the top of a mountain where they have seen him transfigured. During this experience, these three disciples saw Jesus in his heavenly glory while the rest of the disciples waited at the base of the mountain. When Jesus and the three disciples return from this experience, they find the remaining disciples and a crowd. Mark notes that the scene is one of chaos as the disciples are locked in an argument with the religious leaders (Mark 9.14). The argument has to do over a ministry failure. A certain man had brought his son to Jesus for healing. The boy suffers from some sort of ailment referred to as "moonstruck" in the language of the NT. While some commentators equate "moonstruck" sickness with the physical ailment of epilepsy, the text points to a more insidious cause, demon possession. That evil has possession of this boy is seen in its destructive attempts to harm him by casting him into fire and water, probably the home fire and local well. Unable to find Jesus, the father asked the disciples to heal the boy. Such a request was fitting as Jesus' gospel ministry was a ministry of healing, a ministry that Jesus had given to his disciples (See Matt. 10.1-8 and *Healing and the Gospel*). However, the disciples had failed in their ministry endeavor. They could not heal the boy. In a culture based upon honor and shame, such a failure would naturally have brought shame upon both Jesus and his ministry. Jesus' response upon hearing of this ministry failure is one of frustration with his disciples. He turns to them and accuses them of failing to be open to the movement of God in their lives (unbelief) and notes that they are still in need of much inner transformation themselves as they have crooked character (See *Faith/Unbelief*). Jesus asks how long he must put up with his disciples, a roundabout manner of asking how long it would take before his disciples fully grasped their role in what he was doing. Jesus has the boy brought to himself and heals him by casting out the demon, a physical sign of the gospel, God's kingdom driving out the kingdom of Satan.

Questions about failure (Matthew 17.19-20): The disciples are shamed by their failure and Jesus' rebuke. Therefore, they wait until a private moment to inquire as to the nature of their ministry failure. In the culture, their inquiry would have been as much about the nature of their failure as it would have been an attempt to restore their relationship with Jesus. They would have understood that they had brought cultural shame upon Jesus. Jesus demonstrates a character of grace by welcoming their question and providing an answer. Their failure was rooted in the smallness of their faith. They had limited/closed their lives to the power of God working through them (See *Faith/Unbelief*). An openness to such power held the potential of accomplishing great things such as moving mountains, probably a metaphorical reference. Jesus' answer seems to imply that success "on the spot" required an openness to God. However, such openness does not happen while one is "on the spot." Mark records that Jesus instructed the disciples that prayer was required (Mark 9.29). The prayer to which Jesus is referring is not prayer in the moment but a lifestyle of prayer. What Jesus seems to say is that ministry success "on the spot" is rooted in one opening their life to God "off the spot." In other words, a lifestyle of practices and choices that fostered faith was needed if the disciples were to have adequate faith in ministry endeavors.

Application: Sometimes we fail in carrying out the tasks that Jesus has given us, tasks rooted in the gospel. However, such failures do not demonstrate a failure on God's part. God's kingdom drives out Satan's in every instance. The failure is rooted in a closing ourselves to God's kingdom and its power, something called a lack of faith. Being open to God's kingdom and the power it brings is not something that occurs in moments of need, "on the spot" performing. Rather, opening our lives to God's kingdom—fostering faith—is something that takes place through daily choices, "off the spot" training. As we choose daily to develop our faith, we find ourselves empowered by God to carry out the healing work of the gospel.