

Matthew 17:19

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out?

Analysis

Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? The disciples' private inquiry (κατ' ἰδίαν, kat' idian, "apart, privately") shows appropriate humility—they don't demand explanation publicly but seek understanding in private. Their question "Why could not we?" (διὰ τί ἡμεῖς, dia ti hēmeis) reveals perplexity. They possessed delegated authority (Matthew 10:1) and had previously succeeded (Luke 10:17), so this failure bewildered them.

Jesus's response (v. 20) is stunning: **"Because of your unbelief"** (δι' ἀπιστίαν, di' apistian). Despite witnessing countless miracles and receiving Christ's empowerment, their faith remained deficient. He explains that even mustard-seed faith suffices to move mountains—the issue wasn't faith's quantity but quality. Authentic faith, however small, connects to God's unlimited power; false confidence, however great, accomplishes nothing.

Mark's parallel adds: **"This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting"** (Mark 9:29). The disciples relied on past success and positional authority without maintaining vital connection to God through prayer. They treated spiritual authority as personal possession rather than borrowed power requiring constant dependence. This teaches that ministry effectiveness depends not on gifting or position but on abiding relationship with Christ (John 15:5). Apart from Him, we can do nothing.

Historical Context

This question initiated crucial discipleship training. The disciples discovered that spiritual authority isn't automatic or permanent—it requires ongoing cultivation through prayer, fasting, and faith. Jewish background emphasized ritual and technique, but Jesus redirects focus to heart relationship. The phrase "this kind" suggests demonic hierarchy or varying resistance levels, requiring intensified spiritual warfare for stronger opposition.

Church fathers noted this passage as foundational for understanding spiritual warfare. Chrysostom observed that the disciples' failure demonstrated God's wisdom in occasionally allowing His servants to fail, lest they grow proud. Augustine emphasized that faith's efficacy depends on its object (Christ), not subjective strength. The Reformers highlighted the necessity of continual dependence—even apostles failed when relying on themselves. Modern charismatics and cessationists debate applications, but all agree: authentic ministry flows from humble, prayerful dependence on God, not human ability.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between having positional authority from Christ and maintaining the spiritual vitality to exercise that authority effectively?
2. How does the requirement for prayer and fasting challenge modern assumptions about instant results and technique-driven ministry?
3. When have you relied on past spiritual success or positional authority rather than present dependence on God, resulting in failure?

Interlinear Text

Τότε	προσελθόντες	οἱ	μαθηταὶ	τῷ	Ἰησοῦ	κατ'	ιδίαν
Then	came	G3588	the disciples	G3588	to Jesus	apart	G2398
G5119	G4334		G3101		G2424	G2596	
εἶπον	Διατί	ἡμεῖς	οὐκ	ἠδυνήθημεν	ἐκβαλεῖν	αὐτό	
and said	Why	we	not	could	cast	him	
G2036	G1302	G2249	G3756	G1410	G1544	G846	

Additional Cross-References

Mark 9:28 (Parallel theme): And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out?