



Apprenticeship Through Failure

Key idea:

Through their failure to cast out a demon, the disciples learn that ministry and spiritual warfare are not based on technique or their own abilities, but rather by consistently walking close to God through faith and prayer.

Key text:

Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. ¹⁶ “What are you arguing with them about?” he asked. ¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.” ¹⁹ “O unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” ²⁰ So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. ²² “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” ²³ “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” ²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” ²⁹ He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

Key points:

1. When Jesus arrives back to the disciples, he finds them in an argument with the teachers of the law due to the fact that they had been unable to expel a demon that was tormenting a young boy. Jesus then drives the demon from the boy, restoring him to full health and life.

2. The key point in this passage is to answer the question as to why the disciples failed to cast out this demon since Jesus had given them authority to do so and they had successfully driven out many other demons in the past.
3. There are two key things the disciples lacked which led to the disciples' failure:
 - a. A lack of faith - this is indicated by Jesus' immediate statement regarding a generation of unbelief, the conversation with the father of the boy, and the account of this incident in Matthew where Jesus specifically points to a lack of faith in answering the disciples question (see Matthew 17:19-20).
 - b. A lack of prayer - this is how Jesus answers the disciples' question as to why they could not drive the demon out.

Questions for discussion/application:

1. What part of Sunday's teaching stood out most to you? Why?
2. Look at Mark 9:14-29, Matthew 17:14-20, and Luke 9:37-43. How are the accounts similar? What does Mark include that Matthew and Luke leave out? What does this tell me about Mark's purpose in reporting the full incident?
3. Why does Mark include this incident which shows the disciples failing? Is it surprising to see such a negative incident in the lives of these "heroes" of the faith?
4. The description of the boy's suffering clearly indicates he was having epileptic seizures (and Matthew 17:15 specifically states this). Yet, all three Gospel accounts specify there was a demon causing the boy's suffering. Does this mean that the boy did not really have epilepsy, or that all sickness is a result of demonic activity? If not, how do we know this from the Gospels themselves?
5. Matthew 17:19-20 directly attributes the disciples' failure to a lack of faith. Mark, however, does not record that as part of Jesus' answer. How does the discussion with the father, which is not reported by Matthew, make the same point?
6. How would I define faith? What is its essence? What is the opposite of faith? What undermines faith?
7. Jesus tells the disciples that a demon like this only comes out by prayer. Is he referring to a quick, in-the-moment prayer, or to a settled life of prayer? What clues does the text give to let me know?
8. Bret mentioned two things that undermine faith and prayer - self-sufficiency and dependence on technique. Which of these is a bigger temptation for me?

9. How can I grow in my prayer life and faith in the coming weeks? What specific steps do I plan to take to cultivate a closer walk with God in prayer, and thus grow in faith and reliance on Him?
10. Who can I reach out to this week to share the Gospel or strengthen their faith?