

Matthew 17:14-18

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A desperate father approaches Jesus begging him to heal his son's lunacy. He said that Jesus' disciples were unable to help. Jesus scolds the unbelieving and perverted generation and then casts out the demon, curing the boy.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 9:14-27 and Luke 9:37-43.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John had now returned from the mountain where Jesus was transfigured, saying *When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus*. This crowd of people was likely in Caesarea Philippi.

When they came to the crowd then a man came up to Jesus. He was desperate. *Falling on his knees before Jesus, the man instantly begged Him for mercy. "Lord have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill."* This father had a son whom he described as a lunatic. The Greek word Matthew used that is translated as lunatic is "selénaizomai." It means "moon-struck." Lunacy is a faithful translation because lunacy describes the ever-changing appearances, faces, or phases of a person like the moon (lunar). This description suggests that sometimes the boy appears fine, and then suddenly he changes dramatically and becomes a danger to himself and others. The Greek verb "selénaizomai" occurs in a middle-passive voice which means that the lunatic son is the one undergoing and doing the changing (lunacy).

The desperate father continued his plea for his very ill son: *He often falls into the fire and often into the water*. The son's lunacy occurs at times and in ways that puts him in great danger. The father tells Jesus, that he had already brought his son to Your disciples, and they could not cure him. Apparently, this desperate father found one or more of Jesus's disciples first and he asked them to help his son. But they could not help him.

In this passage, the father never explicitly attributes the source of his son's lunacy to anything demonic. However, Jesus does. This father does not seem to recognize the supernatural forces behind the lunacy or physical causes. He just wants a cure for his son. He just wants his boy to be healed. And he hopes that Jesus can heal his son.

And Jesus answered and said, "You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?"

Matthew does not explicitly mention to whom His comment and questions were addressed. Jesus could have been saying them generally and addressing these words to and about every Jew living at that time. Or perhaps to the crowd. But they seem to be directed towards His disciples who just failed to exorcise the demon and cure the man's son. This was adding insult to injury. Not only were they publicly defeated by the demon, but they now were also being publicly called out by their Lord for their lack of faith.

He was scolding them for their unbelief. The father showed faith in *Jesus* by coming to Him and His *disciples*. The *disciples* demonstrated their unbelief and their lack of faith by being unable to cure the *lunatic son*. In addition to calling them *unbelieving*, *Jesus* also labels them a *perverted generation*. *Perverted* means to be twisted off-course. *Jesus* was saying that this *generation* had lost its way and was pursuing the wrong things.

Jesus then rhetorically asked shaming questions. *How long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?* *Jesus* knew that He would not be with this *generation* or His *disciples* in the physical form for much longer. Time was running out for them to develop the faith they would need to carry out the task of building His church once He was no longer *with* them. They had let the Messiah down.

Jesus then indicated that He would *cure* the desperate father's *lunatic son*, when He said *Bring him here to Me*.

Matthew states rather matter-of-factly that *Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once*. But Luke and Mark each gave a more vivid picture of this event

“While he was still approaching, the demon slammed him to the ground and threw him into a convulsion. But *Jesus* rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy and gave him back to his father. 43 And they were all amazed at the greatness of God...”
(Luke 9:42-43a)

“They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. And He asked his father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!’ And *Jesus* said to him, ‘If You can?’ All things are possible to him who believes.’ Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, ‘I do believe; help my unbelief.’
When *Jesus* saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.’ After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, ‘He is dead!’ But *Jesus* took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.”
(Mark 9:20-27)

This was another specific instance demonstrating *Jesus*' spiritual authority over the supernatural. It also showed *Jesus*' compassion and *mercy* for the desperate *man* and his *son*.

As a matter of interest, Matthew does not specify whether the “*they*” who *came to the crowd* refers to these four men (*Jesus*, Peter, James, and John) or that quartet plus the larger group of disciples. Either the larger or smaller group is possible, but Matthew's descriptions throughout

the passages that follow may provide clues that could suggest that it was the smaller group with Jesus instead of all twelve *disciples*.

The main clue that would indicate that references to “*they*” or “*disciples*” referred only to Peter, James, and John is what Matthew wrote in Matthew 17:22: “And while *they* were gathering together in Galilee.” This might indicate that *Jesus* dismissed the larger group of *disciples* and sent them on preaching circuits, as He occasionally seemed to do (Matthew 10:5, Mark 6:7, Luke 10:1) while He spent some extra time with Peter, James, and John. Galilee was set as the rendezvous point once their kingdom errands were finished. If this was the case, then every mention of *disciples* in these passages before Matthew 17:22 may refer to Peter, James, and John and some but not all of the other disciples. Mark however wrote “when *they* came back to the *disciples*” which indicates that at least some of the other *disciples* were present for this occasion (Mark 9:14).

Biblical Text

17:14-18 When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before Him and saying, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.” And Jesus answered and said, “You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me.” And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once.