

Ministry of Grace

Matthew 17

Preface:

Last week we learned about Peter the building block and the Solid Rock of his confession. We learned that God is building His church on this confession and that the gates of hades (death) will not prevail against His church. Now, we're about to get a fresh insight into Jesus' glory and what He wants us to do about it.

The Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-13

¹And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." ⁸And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. ⁹And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead." ¹⁰And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" ¹¹He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹²But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands." ¹³Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

Mark 9:2-13 – ²And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ³And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." ⁸And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. ⁹And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. ¹¹And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" ¹²And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written

of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."

Luke 9:28-36 – ²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. ³⁰And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. ³⁴As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" ³⁶And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.



Notes:

Nobody knows for sure which mountain this transfiguration occurred on. Both Matthew and Mark say that it was a high mountain and Luke says they went up “the” mountain. Many Biblical scholars believe that it was Mt. Tabor, located about 10 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee. It would have taken only about 4 days to walk there from Caesarea Philippi, so it is not out of the question, time wise. However, Mt. Tabor is not a particularly high mountain. But, Mt. Hermon is a “high mountain.” In fact, it is the highest mountain in the entire region, and Caesarea Philippi is at the base of this mountain. This, coupled with the fact that Luke says that they went up “the mountain” would indicate that it is the one that they were already at, Mt. Hermon.

The three who went with Jesus were Peter, James, and John. It's interesting that John and Peter were the only two disciples of Christ who wrote New Testament books outside of the gospel accounts. And, both Peter and John referred to this transfiguration account in their writings (2 Peter 1:16-18, John 1:14). It obviously had a lasting impact on them.

And, here in the seventeenth chapter of Matthew's gospel he says, "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light."

The word translated "transfigured" is a form of *metamorphoō*, which means "to change form." It is the word from which we get our English word metamorphosis, like a caterpillar changing into a butterfly. This word is based on the noun *morphē* which refers to the inward nature and character of something, its inner essence. There is a similar word in Greek, the word, *schēma*, which refers to the outward characteristics and appearance of someone such as clothes, hair color, words, gestures, and actions. When Jesus was transformed, it was not just His outward appearance (*schēma*), but His inner essence (*morphē*) that was changed. For these few brief moments, Jesus' humanity was hidden by His divine essence, the light!

Understanding the difference in these two words helps understand another verse of scripture,

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind ...
(Romans 12:2)

The word "conformed" here is from the Greek word *schēma*, but the word "transformed" is from the word *morphē*. In other words, this verse is telling us not to show forth the outward characteristics of the world around us (don't look and act like the world). Instead, we are to allow ourselves to have our inner essence, our character, changed to be like Jesus.

In Jesus' transfiguration, His earthly body was transformed into his heavenly form. Matthew says that his face shone like the sun. Luke simply says that the appearance of His face was altered. All three accounts indicate that His clothing was changed as well ("became white like light," "became radiant, intensely white," "became dazzling white"). I believe that this brightness of Jesus' body and clothes is His Shekinah glory. The word Shekinah comes from the Hebrew *shekinot*, which means "dwelling" or "one who dwells." A prominent Jewish Rabbi says that Shekinah is "God dwelling in His dwelling place." The word Shekinah does not appear in the Bible, but the concept is evident in a number of places in the Old Testament. It is exceedingly bright, it is typically referred to simply as his "glory" and it is frequently accompanied by clouds. This, perhaps, is so that His glory does not kill those who see it.

And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. (Exodus 13:21-22)

The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. (Exodus 24:16-17)

As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house. (2 Chronicles 7:1-2)

Meanwhile, back on Mt. Hermon. Apparently, when they got to where they were going on the mountain, Jesus began to pray to the Father and the disciples took a nap, because Luke tells us:

Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. (Luke 9:32)

We don't know how they knew who the two men were who were talking with Jesus, but all three accounts state unequivocally that it was Moses and Elijah. Luke also tells us that they were talking about the departure that Jesus was about to make at Jerusalem, referring to His death.

And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:30, 31)

Apparently, the three disciples watched quietly as Jesus, Moses, and Elijah had their conversation. Luke notes that it was as they were departing that impetuous Peter suddenly proclaims, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Nobody knows for sure why Peter made such comments. Perhaps, he felt compelled to say something, and knowing that the feast of tabernacles was near at hand, suggested that they celebrate it here.

What we do know is that he was immediately silenced by a bright cloud (can you say Shekinah Glory?) coming over them and the voice of God, the Father saying,

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him. (Matthew 17:5b)

This terrified them so completely that they fell to the ground in fear (well, duh!) Then, upon being comforted and raised up by Jesus, they saw Him in His humanity again and saw that Moses and Elijah were gone. Following this, as they were descending the mountain, Jesus told them not to mention this event to anyone until after He was raised from the dead.

Jesus Heals a Boy With a Demon

Matthew 17:14-21

¹⁴And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, ¹⁵said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. ¹⁶And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." ¹⁷And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me." ¹⁸And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. ¹⁹Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁰He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." [²¹*But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting.*]

Mark 9:14-29 – ¹⁴And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. ¹⁶And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" ¹⁷And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. ¹⁸And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down,

and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." ¹⁹ And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood." ²² And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." ²³ And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶ And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. ²⁸ And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹ And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Luke 9:37-42 – ³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. ⁴⁰ And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹ Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴² While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

Notes:

On coming down from the mountain, Jesus and His inner circle were met by a crowd of people who are arguing with the Scribes. When Jesus asked what was going on, a man came and knelt before Jesus saying that he had brought his son to Jesus' disciples to be healed, but they had not been able to heal him. His son was possessed by a demon which resulted in him being epileptic (**Matthew 17: 15**), being mute, grinding his teeth, foaming at the mouth, being thrown to the ground (**Mark 9:17, 18**), and having convulsions (**Luke 90:39**). If you remember, back in Matthew 10 we read that Jesus had sent the disciples out to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons." Apparently, they had lost the ability to do these things. When the disciples asked Him why they couldn't heal the boy, He told them that it was due to their little faith. Jesus then proceeded to heal the boy instantly.

Jesus Again Fortells His Death and Resurrection

Matthew 17:22-23

²² As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, ²³ and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.

Mark 9:30-32 – ³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.



Notes:

After coming down from the mountain and healing the demon possessed boy, Jesus and His disciples headed back to Galilee. Apparently they took this opportunity to go visit family and friends because we are told in verse 22 that they were in the process of “gathering together” when Jesus made this announcement, and we’re told in verse 24 that they were near Capernaum. As they were gathering back together Jesus announced that He was about to be taken prisoner and killed. But, He told them that He also would be raised back to life on the third day.

This is not the first time that He had told His disciples what was about to happen. In the previous chapter, when they first arrived in Caesarea Philippi, right after Peter made his amazing confession that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God, we read:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21)

At that time Peter had reprimanded Jesus and was accused of being a Satan. This time, it says that the disciples were greatly distressed. Mark adds that they did not understand what He meant but they were afraid to ask.

The Temple Tax

Matthew 17:24-27

²⁴When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" ²⁵He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" ²⁶And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. ²⁷However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."

Notes:

I find it interesting that Matthew, the former tax collector, is the only gospel writer to tell us about this tax collecting incident. What is this tax that the collectors were asking of Peter? It's not the same tax that Matthew used to collect. He collected civil taxes for the Romans. This tax is a religious tax. The two-drachma temple tax was equivalent to one-half of a shekel. It was used for the maintenance of the temple and its services. This tax was required from every male Jew of twenty years old and older. It was first described in the book of Exodus:

When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as an offering to the LORD. Everyone who is numbered in the census, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the LORD's offering. (Exodus 30:12-14)

Apparently, neither Peter nor Jesus had yet paid this temple tax for the year and, since they were both residents of Capernaum, they were both obligated to pay it. We can also assume, based on Jesus' advice to Peter, that there was no money in the money bag to pay this tax.

When Peter came into the house (probably his own house), Jesus already knew what he was about to say and spoke up before Peter said anything to Him. Jesus' point in this discussion is that Kings who collect taxes (this is a civil tax, like Matthew used to collect), do not require their own children to pay the tax. The sons are free. But – this is the temple tax and the King of the temple is God. Therefore, the Son of God should not have to pay this tax! Jesus, however, did not want to make an issue out of this, probably because He knew He was headed to Jerusalem to confront the Jewish leaders and didn't want any accusation that He was breaking the Law of Moses.

The instructions that he gave Peter are really quite amazing. Why? First of all, when a fish takes anything into its mouth it immediately determines whether it is food or not, and if not, it immediately spits it out. And, if a fish had a coin in its mouth, it would not be able to take the bait and hook into its mouth as well. So, the placement of the coin was another miracle performed by Jesus. And, notice that the coin was exactly the amount that was required to be paid for both Peter and Jesus.

Finally, even though Matthew is the only one of the gospel writers to mention this miracle, he doesn't actually present the miracle, only Jesus' description of what was to be done. We are never actually told that Peter did as instructed, although we have to assume that he did.

So What?

The first “So What” is that we need to listen up. The transfiguration of Jesus would have been an astounding sight for the three disciples to see if it had occurred in broad daylight, in the middle of the day. But, it would have been even more spectacular if it had happened after the sun went down. This may, in fact, be the case. Notice what Luke says in his description of this event:

Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. (Luke 9:32)

And, as Luke describes the healing of the boy afterwards, he says:

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain ... (Luke 9:37)

A literal translation of this is, “And it came to pass on the next day, they having come down from the mountain ...” There is a clear implication that they stayed the night on the mountain. Now, think about this event in this light (or lack thereof). And, I want all of us to “see the light” here.

Remember, part of God’s essence is that He is light. Here are a few verses that confirm this:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5)

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. (John 3:19-21)

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, (Revelation 21:23-24)

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that you are on the mountain with Jesus. You’re very tired from the hike up the mountain and it is very late in the day, so you lie down and close your eyes just for a moment. Suddenly, you are roused from your nap by the presence of a bright light and you awake to see Jesus radiating this light. Then a bright, luminous cloud comes over you, which frightens you. As you fall back to the ground and cover your head in fear, you hear the very voice of God the Father proclaiming, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!”

Then, you feel the hand of God touch you and, what are the very next words you hear, (remember God the Father said to listen to Him) “Rise up, and do not be afraid.” If you read through the Old Testament carefully you will see the expression “rise up” over and over. It is an expression that describes preparation for battle. God, the Father has just commanded you to listen to Jesus and Jesus is saying to you, “rise up, and do not be afraid.”

Are we going to listen to Jesus? Are we going to rise up and follow Him, or are we just going to keep on napping through life?

The next **“So What”** is to understand our commission. In Matthew chapter 10 Jesus had commissioned His disciples to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of heaven. He also gifted them with the ability to perform various miracles.

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. (Matthew 10:5-8)

It has been perhaps a year to a year and a half since that commissioning. For the following week or two they did as they were commanded. However, there is little or no evidence that the disciples have used these gifts of healing since that time. Due to the lack of use, those gifts, as well as their faith, have grown weaker. Is that where you are right now? Has it been so long since you have used the gifts He gave you that your faith and your gifts have grown weak?

Well then, let me ask you another question. Does God call smart, talented people or willing people? Listen to what Paul told the Corinthians,

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, (1 Corinthians 1:26-28)

If we are to listen to what Jesus said to the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, then we should, **“rise up and not be afraid.”** We should get in the battle for His kingdom we should use the gifts He has given us, no matter how weak they might be. We are commanded to use them to build up His church.

Now What?

Like the disciples, we have a commission and we are commanded to do certain things. How many commands are in the Great Commission? Actually, there are only two. One is in **Matthew 28:19** and the other is in **Mark 16:15**. Make Disciples and Preach the Gospel. Are you doing either one of these?

I can already hear you saying, “But – I’m not the kind of person that God wants to use. I know my past, I know what I’ve done and it’s not very nice.” Well, I need to tell you, I know my own past and I have done plenty of things that are not very nice. And, I can assure you that God is not looking for polished gemstones; He’s looking for willing building blocks.

But – You say, “I don’t have any talents that He can use.” If you are a Christian then God has already gifted you to serve Him, if you are willing.

But – I’m afraid I’ll fail. Are you willing to try even if you fail? Are you willing to make a fool of yourself for God’s sake?

But, but, but ... Hey, no more buts. God says, “Rise up and don’t be afraid!”

What are you going to do?

Let’s pray.

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