

# Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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## Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part VII)

### 17:1-13, The Transfiguration

After six days: Luke's account says "about 8 days", which is a Koine Greek way of saying "about a week later". Luke's retelling being a second- or third-hand account likely explains the less precise wording in his account.

Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John: Why only these three? Commentators offer various possibilities. Perhaps to prevent word of this amazing sight (miracle!) getting out before the time was right for it, as seems to be the case in verse 9. Others suggest that Jesus selected these three because they would need to be the first-hand witnesses to fulfill their ministries to the world later.

It's notable that Jesus did not go off alone for this event; this was eternally ordained to happen before His disciples! He is not glorified *apart* from them, because they (and by extension, we!) *share* in His glory. He talks about this in John 17 when He says, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." -- John 17:24

Led them up on a high mountain: There are a few possibilities suggested for the exact location of the Mount of Transfiguration, though it's not identified in the text.

Mount Tabor, which is most oft cited in Roman Catholic tradition, is probably the worst candidate from a logical perspective, as it isn't very high, and it isn't on the way from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum.

Mount Hermon, which is high, but not very close to the Jewish crowds that met Jesus immediately on His descent from the mountain in verse 14

Mount Meron, highest mountain in area close to predominantly Jewish populations, and also happens to be on the way between Caesarea Philippi and Capernaum. This one seems most likely to me.

*“The name of the ‘high mountain’ can never be known; for those who knew the locality have left no information. Tabor, if you please; Hermon, if you prefer it. No one can decide.” -- Spurgeon*

He was transfigured before them: The word transfigured (μετεμορφώθη, “metamorphOthe”), from which we get “metamorphosis”, speaks of a complete transformation, not just a change in outward appearance, though that visible change was **extremely** striking to the disciples; Jesus became so bright in appearance that He appeared like the sun!

Remember, in 16:28, Jesus told His disciples, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Perhaps this is an unexpected initial fulfillment of that prophecy, just a week or so later than when He spoke it!

Commentator David Guzik suggests:

*Essentially this was not a new miracle, but the temporary cessation of an ongoing one. The real miracle was that Jesus, most of the time, could keep from displaying this glory. Yet John said, We beheld His glory. Peter wrote, We were eyewitnesses of His majesty.*

Spurgeon:

*“For Christ to be glorious was almost a less matter than for him to restrain or hide his glory. It is forever his glory that he concealed his glory; and that, though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor.”*

Moses and Elijah: So if I’m Peter, James, or John, this is going to leave mark. First we have Jesus the Son shining like the sun, and now he is joined by two of our favorite Old Testament authors, who lived many centuries ago, speaking with Jesus in His shining glory, *and we recognize them!*

Why Moses and Elijah? Moses represents the law, and Elijah represents the prophets, and Jesus had told his disciples and others that the law and prophets “...bear witness of Me”. So here the sum of all Old Testament revelation comes to meet with Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration!

Talking with Him: Luke 9:31 tells us about the substance of the conversation; they were speaking of what “...he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem”, the upcoming journey to the cross, and presumably His resurrection.

Let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah: Mark 9:6 and Luke 9:33 indicate that Peter didn’t know what he was saying when he said this, as he was about to put the three men before him on equal footing. A reasonable understandable, and completely wrong-headed thing to do. Can we blame him, though?!

A bright cloud overshadowed them: This is the cloud of God’s glory, from which God spoke in the Old Testament in Exodus 33 and later. In rabbinical literature, this was referred to as God’s “shekinah” glory, characterized by light, which some Christian authors have picked up, though the word shekinah does not appear in the Bible.

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!”: God interrupts Peter’s attempt to put Jesus on an equal footing with Moses and Elijah – and while he was still speaking. It was important to interrupt Peter, so that all would know that Jesus is unique and the beloved Son – He deserves special attention, so Hear Him! After all, everything Moses and Elijah (and all the other authors) wrote came from God, so there was only one God, one Authority, standing before Peter and the others: Jesus the Christ.

They fell on their faces and were greatly afraid: Oh, sure, *now* they’re afraid! They didn’t fall on their faces when they saw Jesus transfigured; or when His face started shining like the sun; not when His clothes became as white as the light; not when Moses and Elijah appeared with Him; not when Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus; and not even when the cloud of God’s glory appeared and overshadowed them. But when they heard the voice from heaven, NOW they fall on their faces and are greatly afraid. Okay, I’ll allow it; I probably would have done the same thing!

“Rise, and have no fear”: Wow! This simple word of comfort and encouragement helps explain the purpose of the Transfiguration: to reassure the disciples that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, even if He must be crucified as He had so surprisingly started to reveal to them.

Remember, just prior to this, Jesus revealed His upcoming humiliation and suffering to them. So the timing makes sense; the transfiguration is another divine testimony, a unique and extremely powerful one, to Jesus' essence as the Son of God, and His ultimate mission as the Messiah.

And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only: How appropriate that their entire focus was now forced upon Jesus once again, and only Jesus, the author and perfecter of their faith. The cloud was gone; Moses had left, and Elijah had disappeared. Everything and Everyone they needed was before them.

What does this teach us? The Law can only be understood and useful when it is understood in proper relationship to Jesus Christ. Prophecy can only be understood and useful when it is understood in proper relationship to Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, the Law kills. Apart from Christ, prophecy leads to despair and death.

Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead: The disciples have been receiving training, confirmation, and encouragement to endure what was to come, to be prepared to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. The final confirmation of Jesus' mission and ministry on Earth, however, would be His resurrection from the dead. Until then, reports of what these men had just seen would be more likely to test the faith of those who did not see it rather than strengthen it.

Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first? This is a legitimate question. The disciples had been taught that Elijah must come, according to the promise of Malachi 4:5: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD."

But I tell you that Elijah has come already: Elijah had arrived in the person and work of John the Baptist, who ministered in Elijah's spirit and power (Luke 1:16-17). Just as the Messiah had arrived in a way very unlike what had been taught through the ages, so also Elijah had already arrived in Jesus's cousin!

## 17:14-20/21, Jesus casts out a tough demon

**Note:** *Some translations might not include Verse 21, or mention or include it in a footnote.*

Have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic: This particular boy's epileptic symptoms were demonic in origin, though we should not take that to mean that every case of epilepsy is demonic in origin (then or today). The Mark account of this particular case (Mark 9:14-29) tells us that this particular boy was also made deaf and dumb by this demon.

Matthew quotes the father here using the word σεληνιάζεται (“seleniAHzetai”), which literally means to be “moonstruck”. Latinized, this has come down to English as “lunatic”. The boy was in really bad shape!

So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him: The disciples did cast out demons as recounted in other Gospels (e.g. Luke 10:17). Yet here they could not cure him. There are ranks of demonic powers (Ephesians 6:12), and evidently some demons are more stubborn or resistant than others. Since the disciples had been given the authority to cast out demons before (Matthew 10:8), apparently this demon was more difficult than most.

Their failure was in fact good for them in that it would be used to teach them.

O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you?: You get the sense that Jesus knows the time He has left before He must face the cross is growing short, and He feels frustration that the disciples (whom He loved) were not yet ready to face challenges that lie ahead.

Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of him: Jesus delivered the demon-possessed boy instantly. What was too hard for the disciples was not too hard for Jesus.

Because of your unbelief: Jesus blames the inability of the disciples to cast out the demon on their unbelief. Not the boy, not his father, and not on the stubbornness of the demon. To be successful in a battle against demons, what is needed is complete trust in God, who has complete authority over the demons. Perhaps they were trusting in their status as Jesus's disciples, instead of relying completely on God Himself.

If you have faith as a mustard seed: The faith that we must have has more to do with what kind of faith it is than with how much faith there is. A small amount of faith, as small as a mustard seed (a very small seed), can accomplish great things if that small amount of faith is placed in the great and mighty God.

(Verse 21) But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting: Prayer and fasting don't enable or activate faith; they are marks of it. Regarding demon possession, according to exorcists, prayer and fasting are effective not in and of themselves, but inwardly they remind the practitioner constantly that they are weak, and that all power rests in and with God. Outwardly, these practices demonstrate a willingness to identify with the afflicted person, show an appreciation of the strength of the demonic world, dependence upon God, and communicate a desire to fight and sacrifice for the sake of deliverance of the afflicted individual.

### **17:22-23, Jesus again teaches about His death and resurrection**

The Son of Man is about to be betrayed: Though they were frequent, these reminders about Jesus' suffering and resurrection were hard to accept, and even disbelieved and forgotten by the disciples until after His resurrection (Luke 24:6-8). None of them wanted to believe that any of their group would betray Him.

And the third day He will be raised up: Normally Jesus didn't speak about his His upcoming death without also speaking of His resurrection. We know that the disciples didn't really comprehend the triumph of the resurrection, because "they were exceedingly sorrowful."

### **17:24-27, The Temple Tax**

Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?: This was a normal tax or fee applied to every Jewish man. Faithful Jewish men paid this obligation; others sought to escape the responsibility. The more things change....

And just like today, it was not popular. Commentator R.T. France:

*"It was, however, also a matter of controversy, as the Sadducees disapproved of the tax, and the men of Qumran paid it only once in a lifetime."*

*“Payment could be made in person at the Passover festival in Jerusalem...but collections were made in other areas of Palestine and abroad a month earlier. This incident therefore takes place about a month before Passover.”*

*“After AD 70, when the temple was destroyed, the Romans diverted this tax to the temple of Jupiter in Rome, after which it ceased to be a matter of patriotism and became a symbol of their subjection to a pagan power; the fact that the story is nonetheless recorded is one of the incidental indications that Matthew’s Gospel should be dated before AD 70.”*

From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?: Peter gave the quick and natural answer to this question. But then Jesus explained that He is not liable to pay this tax, because the Father doesn’t require it of His own Son. France again:

*“Rabbis were exempt from paying this tax, and so were the priests in Jerusalem; would Jesus claim a similar exemption? The question assumes that he does pay regularly, and Peter agrees.”*

Nevertheless, lest we offend them: Jesus was not obligated to pay this tax under the principle He had just discussed with Peter; that as a son, not a servant, He did not have to pay this temple tax. Yet Jesus also recognized the importance of avoiding needless controversy, and so was willing to pay the tax so as to not offend those who questioned.

Cast in a hook: Now, Peter was a professional fisherman who used nets to catch a bunch of fish at once, not a dumb little hook and a line. So I wonder how Peter felt about fishing this way; did he hope that none his fishermen buddies saw him trying to catch one fish at a time? Nah, he probably just did as Jesus instructed without worrying about it. *Probably....* 😊

Take that and give it to them for Me and you: Jesus trusted in the miraculous provision of God. It’s not every day – or any day – that someone catches a fish and takes a coin out of its mouth. But Jesus used God’s provision to pay His taxes. Why only pay for Jesus and Peter? Perhaps this was for the city of Capernaum, and only Peter and Jesus were at this time residents of Capernaum.