

“Changed By Glory”
Matthew 17:1-20
November 18, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

The last verse of the previous chapter has puzzled many. Jesus said, **“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.”** Some think Jesus was just mistaken here, believing that the kingdom would come fully in just a short while. I think it better to understand Jesus to be referring to the event we are looking at today, the transfiguration. In a way, the transfiguration reveals Jesus as he will be at his second coming. And there were some standing with him who witnessed this glory in the transfiguration: Peter, James and John.

Jesus has been speaking of his sufferings and death. To outward appearances, he looked like a poor prophet. He was materially poor, growing more and more out of favor with the powers that be, and often misunderstood by his own followers. What’s more, he is talking about death on a cross, a death of shame that speaks loudly of a cursed life. But appearances can be deceiving. I serve on a board with a man who knew Sam Walton before he died. I asked this man if the stories about Mr. Walton driving around in an old pickup truck were true. He assured me that they were true; he had even been in that truck himself. Mr. Walton’s truck wasn’t the \$80,000 luxury trucks of today, but just the old, plain trucks of several decades ago. If you were to see an old man driving an old pickup truck, you would probably conclude that you were looking at a retired man on a fixed, limited income who was driving this truck because he had no other choice. In Walton’s case, you would be far off the mark. If you could speak to his accountant and get a full statement of his income and assets, you would gain a more complete and accurate picture.

In the transfiguration, we get to speak to Jesus’ accountant and gain a more accurate picture of him. The veil is pulled back that has been covering his glory. We see him as he is. He is not so much changed here as revealed in his true nature. The biggest change that occurs in this passage is in the lives of those who behold his glory. It is the same for us. As the apostle Paul reported, **“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another”** (2 Cor. 3:18). We are changed by his glory in at least two ways.

I. Listening to Jesus – v. 1-13

Peter has made a confession about Jesus, proclaiming him to be the Christ, the son of the living God (16:16). Then Jesus himself makes a confession,

announcing his coming sufferings, death and resurrection. Now, God the Father makes a confession about Jesus, showing his true and glorious nature and his status as God's beloved Son. This happened on a mountain, similar to the time in the Old Testament when God's glory appeared to Moses on a mountain. Here, the glory of Jesus appears. We read that **"his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light"** (v. 2). There is a similar description of Jesus in Revelation 1, which reveals Jesus in his current glory as the ascended Jesus seated on his heavenly throne. It is hard for us to comprehend what true glory is like. One of the common metaphors for it in the Bible is bright light, which draws our attention. Another aspect of glory is complete purity, pictured by the whiteness of his clothes.

Two key Old Testament figures appear to converse with Jesus. Luke tells us that they talk about Jesus' departure, meaning his coming death. Moses is the prominent figure in the Old Testament law and Elijah in the Old Testament prophets. A common shorthand for the Old Testament is to describe it as the law and prophets.

The presence of these three key figures—Moses, Elijah and Jesus—gives Peter an idea. He wants to initiate a building program right on this mountain, erecting three tents, one for each of these figures. It seems likely that Peter was thinking this was going to be the new headquarters of this messianic movement. Jesus' itinerant ministry was concluding, and now people would come to him as the King of this new kingdom of God. That's the way a proper kingdom should be run, Peter reasoned. It is clear that Peter still doesn't comprehend what Jesus had been saying about his sufferings and death.

I was taught that it was impolite to interrupt others while they are speaking, and that's usually true. But there are times when people are saying such foolish and harmful things that the kindest thing you can do is to interrupt them. This was one of those times, and Peter is interrupted by God himself. In the previous passage, Peter was rebuked sharply by Jesus in those words, "Get behind me, Satan." Now, he is rebuked by God the Father. God's message added to the glory of the Son. **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him"** (v. 5). If I could word this plainly, God speaks audibly from heaven and says, "Peter, shut up and listen to my Son.

This is the second time God has spoken from heaven, the first time occurring at the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. The Father's message has been consistent, declaring who Jesus is, the beloved Son of God, and the application of that in our lives. We are to listen to him. We are transformed as we see the glory of Jesus enough to listen to him.

This verse helps give us some perspective on how we should view the Old Testament, represented by Moses and Elijah. The voice from heaven singles out Jesus as the one to be listened to. Does that mean that we need no longer pay

attention to the Old Testament? No, because Jesus himself elevated the Old Testament as the word of God to be heeded. But it does mean that we need to listen to Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament. And this also means that we need to listen to the rest of the New Testament writings. It was Jesus who promised the coming Holy Spirit who would lead his disciples into all truth. So listening to Jesus is much broader than just paying attention to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It means to listen to the whole Bible for the simple reason that Jesus has taught us to do so. When Peter was reflecting on this incident later in one of his letters, he said, **"We ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word"** (2 Pet. 1:18-19). Astoundingly, Peter refers to the Bible we have as something "more sure" than a voice from heaven.

Would it make any difference in your life if every time you opened the Bible, you heard the voice of God thunder from heaven, "Listen to my beloved Son"? Let me point out just a couple of things I see in this passage about listening to Jesus through his word. The first thing I notice is that there is a community aspect to our listening. The command to listen is plural. While we must certainly listen individually, there is also a corporate side to listening to God. We listen in community by listening to what God is teaching others. That's why we study the Bible in small groups. That's why we give a major portion of our corporate worship each week to the preached word of God. We are to listen to God's word in community and not just by ourselves.

A second thing I notice about listening to Jesus is that his first word to the disciples after this command is a gospel word. When the disciples heard the voice of God from heaven, they fell down terrified. That is the common response in the Scriptures to God's presence. Jesus came to them, touched them and said, **"Rise, and have no fear."** Sinful men and women tremble in fear in the presence of a holy God. Jesus brings his gospel word to us not to fear. It is only through Jesus that the fear can be removed. Can you listen to Jesus speak that word into your heart today? What is it you are fearing? Financial setbacks? Health challenges? Marital trouble? Loneliness? Child-rearing issues? Jesus speaks this word and the Father tells us to listen to him. We will do so to the degree that we see him in his glory. It is the glorified Jesus who speaks to us this word, and when he says not to fear we can have confidence that it is because he knows we have nothing to fear.

II. Praying to Jesus – v. 14-20

As they come down off the mountain, they notice that there is a crowd gathered around the disciples. They don't have to wait long for an explanation. A man comes up to Jesus and kneels before him. **"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. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him” (v. 15-16). Something about this touched Jesus at a deep, emotional level. You can hear his strong emotion in his response. **“O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?”** What is Jesus feeling here? It sounds to some like annoyance, but I think it’s closer to deep weariness. Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine. In his humanity, he grows weary in his fight against sin and all its devastating effects. And he longs for it to be put in the past. Jesus sees the significant brokenness of this sin-filled world in the plight of this demon-possessed boy. Though the Bible doesn’t believe that every illness is caused by demonization, it believes that some is. In this case, a demon sought to destroy this little boy, throwing him alternately into the fire to burn him to death and into the water to drown him. So Jesus rebuked the demon and the boy was healed instantly.

The disciples later came to Jesus privately and asked him why they were unable to cast out this demon. They had undoubtedly felt the keen disappointment of this father at their failure. Jesus was perhaps his last hope, and he had come to find Jesus only to discover that he was away. I can imagine the disciples saying, “It’s okay, because he’s given us his authority to cast out demons. We can take care of this for you.” After all, they had earlier been able to cast out demons, when Jesus sent them out two by two (Matt. 10). Then they spoke the words they had used before, the very words undoubtedly that Jesus had used in similar situations, but nothing happened. Perhaps they tried repeatedly, but with similar failure. Maybe they each took turns attempting to cast out this demon, but nothing worked. This father must have been even more discouraged than before, and the disciples must have been experiencing a great loss of confidence.

Jesus’ explanation for their failure seems contradictory. **“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”** (v. 20). Do you see the apparent contradiction? Jesus says their failure was due to their little faith, and then adds if they have only a little faith, just the size of a tiny mustard seed, they would be able to do mighty things. Jesus must mean different things by the little faith they have and the little mustard seed faith they lack. Mark helps us understand this. He quotes Jesus as saying, **“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer”** (Mark 9:29). Their little faith was prayerless faith. Had they prayed, mustard seed faith would have been enough even to overcome this powerful demon.

Like the disciples, we face challenges in this broken world that are far too big for us. These challenges are as impossible as successfully attacking a medieval castle. Several years ago, Wendy and I had the opportunity of staying in just such a castle in Austria. The castle sat atop a steep hill, requiring an

attacking army to climb slowly up this hill. The walls of the castle were about two feet thick, with slots cut in them that were wide on the inside to allow the archers plenty of room to draw their bows, but narrow on the outside to present only a small opening for incoming arrows. The castle gate is usually the weak point, but there were several efforts made to strengthen this weak point. There was an area above the gate that would allow defensive measures to be taken against anyone outside the gate, including such things as pouring boiling oil on their heads. If you somehow made it past the first gate, there was a second gate that would have to be breached, and it too was protected by multiple defensive features. Though the castle we were staying in lacked this feature, many castles of this era had a moat surrounding it. Such castles were nearly impossible to attack successfully, causing invaders instead to rely on things such as a siege or treachery from within.

The brokenness of this world is like attacking a castle. Jesus cites something that is equally impossible: moving a mountain. Castles can be conquered and mountains moved by prayers to this glorious Lord of ours. And it doesn't take mighty faith—just a little faith will do. Do you remember what the Greek mathematician Archimedes said? “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.” Prayer is the long lever reaching all the way to heaven, and faith is the fulcrum on which we place it. The result, promised by Jesus, is that **“nothing will be impossible for you.”**

Is there a mountain that needs moving in your life? Maybe it's your marriage, or perhaps a need with your children. For others, it might be a sin pattern that has long plagued you and before which you feel powerless. It might be a financial need, a health challenge or a miserable job. Could I ask you to think about such a mountain in your life right now? Now let me urge you to listen to Jesus in what he says about the power of just a little prayer. Will you pray about that every day for the next thirty days or until God moves the mountain? What would a moved mountain look like? It may be granting your request just as you ask it. Or it may be answering your request with a “No,” but then satisfying you with that answer. To satisfy you with a “No” is the moving of a mountain. Or it could be changing your heart to alter the request just a little. For example, if you've been praying for a new job, God might move a mountain and change both you and your current job enough to satisfy you deeply. Jesus is not asking you to spend two hours in prayer about this. Two minutes would be enough, as long as you are casting yourself upon the mercy of Jesus in this. After all, mustard seed size faith is enough.

CONCLUSION:

These are our two weapons, and they are our only weapons: the word of God and prayer. It is enough because our glorious Jesus is enough.