

Matthew 17:14 – 27

^{17:1} Six days later Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them; and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light. ³ And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him. ⁴ Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ ⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!’ ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. ⁷ And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, ‘Get up, and do not be afraid.’ ...

¹⁴ When they came to the crowd, a man came up to Jesus, falling on his knees before him and saying, ¹⁵ ‘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. ¹⁶ I brought him to your disciples, and they could not cure him.’ ¹⁷ 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.’ ¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, ‘Why could we not drive it out?’ ²⁰ And he said to them, ‘Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. ²¹ [But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.] ²² And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going 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 deeply grieved.

²⁴ When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter and said, ‘Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?’ ²⁵ He said, ‘Yes.’ And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, ‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?’ ²⁶ When Peter said, ‘From strangers,’ Jesus said to him, ‘Then the sons are exempt. ²⁷ However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in 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 you and me.’

Cultural Background

- In Exodus 19, God had called Israel to meet him on the mountain. But they said, ‘No way!’ In response, God came down veiled in the Tabernacle (later, the Temple). Notice that on the mountain of the transfiguration, Jesus meets with the Father in the Spirit (Mt. 17:1 – 13). Thus, Jesus continues to retell Israel’s story. The prophets and the disciples are witnesses to it.
- The two drachma tax went to the upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem. In Ex. 30:13 – 16, its predecessor – the tax for the care of the Tabernacle – is presented (in ancient Hebrew terminology) as a tax of half a shekel. A shekel was worth four drachmas.

Questions

1. Recall what the transfiguration means: anticipating the resurrection of Jesus, and his new humanity saturated with God's presence, being available for everyone
2. The disciples already cast out demons starting from Mt.10:8. So is this to highlight a limitation on the disciples' faith? Why are they unable to do it here?
 - a. Is there something more difficult about the boy being demonized? Are there increasing difficulties in the ministry?
 - b. Is this a reflection on the disciples who have not seen Jesus' transfiguration?
 - c. Were they not praying enough?
3. Why is 'self-harming' or even 'suicidal' the picture of human beings in sin?
 - a. The father misdiagnoses the son. He says, 'he is a lunatic and is very ill,'
 - b. Why does the boy throw himself into the fire and the water? He is being demonized. But his father didn't understand that.
 - c. How is the transfiguration of Jesus a contrast with the boy being inhabited by a demon?
 - d. The curtain is pulled back on both Jesus' humanity and the boy's humanity. Jesus is going to purify his own humanity. The boy demonstrates how our humanity is vulnerable to evil and also being misdiagnosed.
 - e. Note: In Scripture, the reason why we are vulnerable to the demonic is because of a weakness in our human nature. There is damage there. And our sinful actions can make us magnets for other kinds of evil being drawn to us. For example:
 - i. ^{Mt.12:43} 'Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. ⁴⁴ Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.' We are empty and need to be filled by Jesus' Spirit.
 - ii. ^{Eph.4:26} 'Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not give the devil an opportunity.' Anger becomes a magnet for other sin and evil, and perhaps demonic forces as well. Unforgiveness and bitterness is what I have seen more than any other sin lead to demonic influence in human lives.
 - f. Application: In what other ways do we make the wrong diagnosis of human evil, making it too shallow? Does our human nature need to be healed and transfigured with Jesus?
4. What's going on with v.21?
 - a. It seems to be a later addition in later manuscripts. I think later Christians were at a loss for why this story is included. We're going to ignore it for now. I don't think that the lesson is, 'The disciples just needed to fast in addition to pray.'
 - b. Also, it doesn't make sense to me to put together 'faith needs to be small, like a mustard seed' and 'pray and fast harder.'
5. Why does Jesus refer to 'moving mountains' in v.20?
 - a. Which mountain is Jesus referring to? Is he referring to the physical mountain or the experience on the mountain? The experience of him and of God on the mountain!
 - b. What had just happened on the mountain? The purification of humanity in the body of Jesus by God.
 - c. How did God want to meet Israel on mountains?
 - i. Mount Sinai: God's PLAN A was to meet Israel on the mountain, face to face, so their faces could shine like Moses' face did (Ex.34). Instead, God decided to use PLAN B and come veiled in the Tabernacle.
 - ii. Mount Zion: Meet Israel in the Temple, which was the stone version of the Tabernacle. But again, there was a veil separating God from Israel. Only the high priest went behind the veil and saw God.
 - d. What has Jesus done on mountains in Matthew?
 - i. John the Baptist quoted part of Isaiah 40. Implicitly, he was also referring to this: 'Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.' (Isa.40:4) It's a poetic reference to reversal.
 - ii. Jesus called the disciples to him when he gave the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5 – 7). He both received his own teaching into his own humanity, writing his law into his own heart

- (fulfilling Jeremiah 31:31 – 34), and also giving it to the disciples for them to internalize too. He was retelling Israel's story, fulfilling what God wanted to do with Israel.
- iii. After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus went up to a mountain and prayed by himself (Mt.14:23) and then returned to the disciples.
 - iv. Before the feeding of the four thousand, Jesus went up to a mountain (Mt.15:29) to heal and feed the people.
 - v. Notice that Simon Peter wants to stay on this mountain and build tabernacles there! (Mt.17:1 – 13) He clearly wants to keep experiencing this.
 - vi. Mountains seem to be a place of safety, for the ninety-nine sheep who don't wander (Mt.18:12).
 - vii. Jesus will refer to Mount Zion as another mountain that the disciples will be able to cast into the sea (Mt.21:21), as a metaphor for taking the presence of God from the Temple into the Sea of the Gentiles.
 - viii. Jesus, after his resurrection, will meet with the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, to send them out into the world in the Great Commission (Mt.28:16).
- e. Jesus connects his resurrection to this 'mountain' in v.22 – 23. So he is thinking about resurrection for himself and others, when he says 'moving mountains.'
6. Jesus is clearly critiquing the Temple in 17:24 – 27. How exactly is he doing that?
 - a. He pays for his own and Simon Peter's 'tax' to support the Temple.
 - b. He is fairly flippant and dismissive of it, which shows how he felt about the Temple.
 - c. This confirms the general idea that Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain is the counterpoint to the Temple in Jerusalem on Mount Zion. God has always wanted to dwell in human beings, not in buildings of stone.
 7. Application: If God has always wanted to dwell in human beings, not in buildings of stone, then by definition, He wants to transfigure our lives. Jesus is just the first human being, and the source for all human beings.
 - a. Illus: Leader illustrate personally, or give analogy
 - b. What area of your life do you sense He wants to transfigure?