

# MATTHEW

## Chapter 17

### *The Transfiguration*

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. <sup>3</sup> Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. <sup>4</sup> Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” <sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” <sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them. **“Get up,”** he said. **“Don’t be afraid.”** <sup>8</sup> When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. <sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, **“Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”** <sup>10</sup> The disciples asked him, **“Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”** <sup>11</sup> Jesus replied, **“To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. <sup>12</sup> But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”** <sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Jesus has just begun to show his disciples that God’s plan for him as the Christ (16:16) will take him to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise to eternal life (16:21). Peter’s rebuke of Jesus (16:22) is likely representative of all the Twelve, as is almost everything else Peter says or does in Matthew’s Gospel. After rebuking Peter (16:23), Jesus has taught his disciples that their way will be a cruciform existence as well (16:24-28). He has grounded this teaching in the promise that he, the Son of Man, is about to come in power and glory to judge everyone (16:27). In fact, before they taste death, some of the disciples will see with their own eyes the reign of Jesus, the Son of Man (16:28). This man who goes to the cross will also be raised and will appear in unthinkable glory. (CC p. 851)

Now God vouchsafes to some of those disciples the privilege of seeing the glory of Jesus, so that they might continue to learn that “cross” and “glory” are not mutually exclusive categories, but are the divinely ordained sequence of salvation, both for the one who accomplishes it and for those who receive it in him. The chief purpose of the transfiguration in Matthew’s Gospel is to proclaim the true identity and glory of Jesus, so as to undergird and support Jesus’ difficult teaching about the cross. This glorious Jesus is one of who has begun to teach about God’s unexpected way of salvation. His teaching is true, and the Father’s

voice from the cloud emphatically commands Jesus' disciples both then and now, "Listen to him!" (17:5). One day, this glorious One will return, and judgment will be given. Until then, "listen to him!" (CC pp. 851-852)

**17:1-8** The unit moves, in a sense, from glory to glory. Perhaps not surprisingly, what propels the story forward is the way that Peter interrupts and speaks foolishly (17:4) when he should be silent and "listen" (17:5). Matthew quickly narrates how Jesus ascends a high mountain with three disciples in tow and how his appearance is radically changed before their very eyes (17:1-2). In a style that seems somewhat uncharacteristic, in 17:1-2 the evangelist employs kai, "and," as he lays independent clause next to independent clause with no predicate position participles. The final declaration, headed with de, perhaps marks the end of the introduction: "Jesus did take,... and he did bring up, ... and he was transformed,... and his face shone,... and (de) his clothes became..." Jesus and the three disciples are on the mountain, and he is radiating glory and majesty. (CC p. 852)

If this were not impressive enough, Matthew now employs his well-beloved imperative idou, "look," to mark a new development to which Peter feels the need to respond (17:3-4). Now Moses and Elijah appear to the disciples, who perceive that the two mysterious figures are "speaking together with" Jesus. Incredibly, Peter interrupts the glorious conversation with his own impetuous words. It is not clear whom Peter includes in "for us to be here is good." Most likely he refers to himself along with James and John. Then he offers to make three shelters, one for each of the three great one who are there on the mountain. (CC p. 852)

In the next part of the unit (17:5), Matthew's narrative offers no explicit evaluation of Peter's words. Implicitly, however, the noteworthy twofold use of idou, "look," underscores the further revelation and silences Peter. While Peter is still speaking, "look," a bright cloud overshadows the group. With a second rapid "look," Matthew tells us that the Father's voice speaks from the cloud. Peter had grouped Jesus together with Moses and Elijah, offering to build a booth for each of them. The Father's word contravene Peter and focus attention solely on Jesus, whom the Father names again (as in 3:17) as his "beloved Son, in whom" he is "well-pleased." The emphatic command "listen to him" reveals the folly of Peter's rash decision to speak and elevates Jesus over both Moses and Elijah. (CC pp. 852-853)

In 17:6-8, the amazing incident draws quickly to a close. For the first time in this passage, the disciples are said to be terrified (17:6), and they fall on their faces and stop looking. Jesus" approaches and touches them and speaks patient and forgiving words: "get up and stop being afraid" (17:7). The disciples look up, and Matthew emphatically states that "they saw no one except Jesus himself, alone" (17:8). He is the Son of God. They are to listen to him and to him alone. (CC p. 853)

**17:1** *six days*. Mark also says “six days”(Mk 9:2), counting just the days between Peter’s confession and the transfiguration, whereas Luke, counting all the days involved, says, “About eight days” (Lk 9:28). (CSB)

Indication that Peter’s confession of faith and the transfiguration are closely connected. (TLSB)

This time reference is quite remarkable in Matthew’s narrative. It is the first specific reference as to the passage of time in the entire Gospel. Since Matthew rarely employs such references and shows no interest in overtly assigning symbolic or theological meanings to them, there is likely no more significance to this notation other than to reflect the historical and chronological reality. (CC p. 849)

TOOK – *paralambanei* – A tender word used frequently by Matthew. It occurs six times in Mt 1 and 2 with reference to Joseph taking Mary or the Child.

As elsewhere, I have given a somewhat archaic translation for the historical present tense verbs: “Jesus did take along... and he did bring them up.” Perhaps the two historical presents are intended to the reader imaginatively involved in a new dramatic development. (CC p. 849)

*Peter, James and John*. These three disciples had an especially close relationship to Jesus (see 26:37; Mk 5:37). (CSB)

Three of the first disciples called (4:18–22). Jesus selected them several times to be with Him at key moments (26:37; Mk 5:37). (TLSB)

It is not clear why Matthew has put the article in front of “Peter” but no article before the other two names. In Matthew “Peter” is almost always arthrous, whereas there is more variety with other proper names. (CC p. 849)

These three were intimates of Jesus. They were witnesses to His greatest glory on earth but also His deepest degradation. Both required the fuller faith. (Ylvisaker)

*high mountain*. Its identity is unknown. However, the reference to Caesarea Philippi (16:13) may suggest that it was Mount Hermon, which was just northeast of Caesarea Philippi (see note on Lk 9:28). (CSB)

Possibly Mount Tabor or Hermon. Mountains were common sites for significant events: temptation (Mt 4:8), sermon (5:1), prayer (14:23), feeding of 4,000 (15:29); God revealed Himself to both Moses and Elijah on Mount Sinai (Horeb; Ex 19:3; 1Ki 19:8). (TLSB)

The location, however, is not as important as the event. So, too, the place where we hear the Word is not nearly so important as the fact that we do hear it, and in faith. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

*by themselves*. Luke adds “to pray” (Lk 9:28). (CSB)

This prepositional phrase is adverbial meaning “privately.” (CC p. 850)

The night on the mountain was spent in prayer and thus Jesus renewed His strength for His arduous work... upcoming death which He had just spoken to the disciples about. (Ylvisaker)

**17:2** *he was transfigured*. His appearance changed. The three disciples saw Jesus in his glorified state (see Jn 17:5; 2Pe 1:17). (CSB)

Gk *metamorphoomai*, “to change into a wholly different form or appearance” (Eng “metamorphosis”). Christ’s human appearance became dazzlingly bright as He displayed His divine glory. (TLSB)

The passive of metamorpho literally means “to be changed in form.” The Greek enters English as “be metamorphosed.” The same meaning, but derived from the Latin equivalent, is “be transfigured.” The twofold change is described as “his face shone like the sun” and “his clothes became white as the light.” This was a clear demonstration of His deity. Contrast Jesus’ “form” here (-morth in the verb) with the usual appearance of Jesus during His ministry in “form (morpha) of a slave in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

It was for Jesus to give Him comfort and strength for His suffering and death. It was a sign of what glory that the Father would give after the perfection of His redemption work. It was also for the disciples. This should fortify them against the offense which lay in His humiliation and a sign and pledge of what they, in common with all believers, were to experience in the kingdom of glory (2 Peter 1:15 ff). (Ylvisaker)

Jesus has already taught that, when he comes again I judgment to separate out the weeds from the wheat, the righteous will “shine forth like the sun. The glory of the righteous will be reflected glory that comes from their relationship with the father through the Son. (CC p. 853)

Romans 12:2 “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

2 Corinthians 3:18 “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

**17:3** *Moses and Elijah.*† Moses is the representative of the old covenant and the promise of salvation, which was soon to be fulfilled in the death of Jesus. Elijah is the appointed restorer of all things (Mal 4:5–6; Mk 9:11–13). The disciples here witness the confirmation of Jesus’ claim (5:17) that he fulfills the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Lk 9:31 says that they talked about Christ’s death. See note on Lk 9:30. (CSB)

The great lawgiver and the outstanding prophet were representative of the OT Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets (5:17; 11:13). (TLSB)

Even a relatively uninformed disciple of Jesus can recall the times when the great mediator and Law-giver (Exodus 24 and 34) and the great prophet (1 Kings 19) went up into the mountain and spoke with the Lord God. As with the account of Jesus walking on the sea with power over the troubled creation (Mt 14:22-33), here it is difficult to avoid the implication that Matthew wants his hearers/readers to see in Jesus the embodiment of Israel’s God, now visible to them. (CC p. 855)

These two are the foremost agents of God’s salvation in the OT. They point to Jesus as the one who fulfills the entire OT story of redemption. The ministries of both ended in a very unusual way, each pointing to the resurrection of Jesus. God himself buried Moses in a location unknown to anyone (Deut 34:5-6), and so his body could not be found. Elijah was spirited directly into the heavens in a whirlwind (2 Kg 2:11) and death had no hold on him. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

Moses was the founder of the Old Covenant. Elijah, the restorer, the reformer, the mightiest of the prophets. Moses was cared for in death and Elijah was taken in a fiery chariot to heaven. Jesus will be preserved in death – His body shall not see corruption (Ps. 16:8 ff; Acts 2:24 ff), and He shall return in life to heaven. (Ylvisaker)

TALKING WITH JESUS – Luke reports that they spoke about his departure (exodus, His exodus) which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem (Lk 9:31). In the preceding context of Matthew, 16:21 gives weight to the view that the three spoke about Jesus’ coming death. Like the word “departure” in English exodus (Lk 9:31) is used figuratively for death (2 Peter 1:15; 2 Timothy 4:6), and in the early church of martyrdom. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

Moses and Elijah appeared to them, speaking together with Jesus. (CC p. 850)

**17:4** LORD, IT IS GOOD FOR US TO BE HERE – Peter may have felt as though he and his fellow disciples were almost in heaven. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

Peter’s proposal gives Jesus the same honor shown for Moses and Elijah, thus implying that Jesus was equal with them. (TLSB)

The infinitive “to be,” is the subject of the linking verb clause “good it is” and the accusative pronoun “us,” is the subjective of the infinitive. English usage requires adding “for us to be here is good,” or this could be rendered more loosely as “us being here is good.” Who does Peter include in “us”? Most likely he refers to the three apostles – himself, James and John – although that would be clearer if Peter gone on to say “we will make three shelters” instead of “I will make three shelters.” If Peter intended to include Moses and Elijah in “us,” the pronoun would imply that the apostle regards himself (and perhaps James and John) to be in the same category (with the same status before God: as the towering OT figures who now appear in glory. (CC p. 850)

*three shelters.* See notes on Mk 9:5 (Peter may have desired to erect new tents of meeting where God could again communicate with his people (see Ex 29:42). Or he may have been thinking of the booths used at the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:42). In any case, he seemed eager to find fulfillment of the promised glory then, prior to the sufferings that Jesus had announced as necessary.); Lk 9:33 (Temporary structures to prolong the visit of the three important persons: lawgiver, prophet and Messiah. The idea was not appropriate, however, because Jesus had a work to finish in his few remaining days on earth.). (CSB)

By suggesting this he probably wanted this to continue. The announcement of Jesus death (16:21) must have staggered them. Perhaps Peter thought it would be better to stay there than to face Jesus’ prediction. It indicates a desire for permanency of glory apart from the suffering of the cross. Mark and Luke tell us that Peter spoke these words because he was so frightened that he didn’t know what else to say (Mk 9:6; Lk 9:28-36). It might seem that Peter, being true to his character, was reacting to this awesome sight when perhaps he should have been silent. This is a good lesson for us. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 12, Part 1)

**17:5** God also revealed His presence on Mount Sinai with a cloud (Ex 19:9). (TLSB)

A VOICE FROM THE CLOUD – The booming witness from the Father is similar to the one He gave at Jesus’ Baptism (Matthew 3:17). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

*them.* Jesus, Moses and Elijah. (CSB)

*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.* The same words spoken from heaven at Jesus' baptism (3:17). No mere man, but the very Son of God, was transfigured. (CSB)

The Father answers the question Jesus had asked His disciples in 16:15. What Peter, James, and John had not heard at the Baptism of Jesus (3:17), they hear now. (TLSB)

It's significant that the Father first spoke these words when His Son formally began His ministry of rescue, and now repeats them as the Savior prepared to complete His mission. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

“This one” is the key, not Moses or Elijah. The Son is the one who fulfills Israel's hopes and promises and brings the royal reign of God. God silences Peter, who has been speaking when he should not, giving voice to his own inadequate perspective. (CC p. 858)

LISTEN TO HIM – akouete – Keep on hearing him. We too are directed to the voice of Christ, to Christ's Word, which is God's Word, and not to wonderful visions. We have enough in his Word. That is a bright light, which gives light to us in this dark world, and shows us the way of salvation. Refusing to listen to the Prophet Moses (Deut 18:15) as he speaks to us through Scripture (Jn 5:39) and those who proclaim his message (Lk 10:16), is a serious matter indeed, for it signifies that one is not a child of God (Jn 8:47) (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

Moses had foretold that God would raise up a prophet to whom the people should listen (Dt 18:15). Jesus was that prophet. He alone knows the Father, who has handed over all things to His Son (11:27). “All who want to be saved ought to listen to this preaching. For the preaching and hearing of God's Word are the Holy Spirit's instruments. By, with, and through these instruments the Spirit desires to work effectively, to convert people to God, and to work in them both to will and to do” (FC SD II 52). (TLSB)

Given the prior pericope of 16:21-28, where Jesus had to brutally reject Peter's point of view and teach his disciples about the way of the cross, as well as the teaching that will follow in 17:9-14, the present infinitive akouete here probably is emphatic: “listen to him!” The next verse begins with a participle of the same verb akousates, “when they heard,” and shows what happens when the Three cannot help but “listen,” at least on this occasion. (CC p. 851)

The truth to which the disciples need to listen has to do with the new revelation that Jesus has now begun to show to his disciples about the way of the cross for himself and for them (16:21-28). Without this understanding of Jesus' person and work, there can be no true understanding of Jesus at all. Without this understanding of the life of discipleship, there can be no discipleship at all. (CC p. 859)

**17:6** *fell on their faces*. The disciples were overcome with awe at what they saw and heard. (TLSB)

*terrified*. Primarily with a sense of awe at the presence and majesty of God. (CSB)

The great fear that caused the disciples to fall face-down on the ground reminds us of the later event in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the words of Jesus, “I am He!” caused His would-be captors to fall to the ground (John 18:6). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

**17:7** CAME AND TOUCHED THEM – He approached them and not vice versa. Because of our sins and sinfulness we are afraid to approach him. But he mercifully comes to us. This is like a parent touching a frightened child. On the last Day believers will be able to stand up in his presence, not because of their own strength, but because Jesus has come and taken hold of them by his grace. When Jesus takes hold of us, he casts out our fear. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 12, Part 1)

Jesus moved the disciples out of their dazed state by this human gesture. (TLSB)

**DON'T BE AFRAID** – The power and comfort of these words rests in the fact that Jesus is the speaker. He is the one who gave his life for our salvation. As a child's fear is dispelled by a loving parent's words, so our fear is dispelled by the words of Jesus. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

The aorist passive of “rise here probably has the intransitive active meaning “rise, get” rather than the truly passive sense of “be raised.” Since the prior verse explicitly say that the disciples were very frightened, here “do” plus the present imperative “not fear” means “stop being afraid.” (CC p. 851)

**17:8** NO ONE EXCEPT JESUS – Earthly home, earthly ambitions fade away and die. Jesus is still with the souls that trusted in Him. He is with them as certainly when they go down into the work and the trials and the temptations of the commonplace routines of daily life, as He was when they were with Him on the mount. (PC)

Moses and Elijah had vanished; Jesus had resumed His normal appearance. (TLSB)

The focus is exclusively on Jesus, and not at all upon Moses and Elijah, who are now gone. (CC p. 851)

As sinners our feelings are very fickle. We can be ecstatic one moment, fearful the next. Christ and his Word give us a steady new spirit.

**17:9 DON'T TELL ANYONE** – The command to be quiet about this mountaintop experience until Jesus' death and resurrection is because those events will put the transfiguration into proper perspective. The transfiguration is not so much a saving event in itself, but the pre-figuration of Jesus' resurrection glory. The divine glory was put on display so that we could understand the death and resurrection of Jesus as the dramatization of John 3:16. In the words of Peter, the transfiguration made the Gospel "more certain" (2 Peter 1:19). – People were not prepared to receive the lesson. Had the story been told, people would have stumbled at the cross which would not have been seen as a fitting sequel. (PC)

What the three disciples had seen was obviously out of the ordinary. Until Jesus rose from the dead, the general public and the other disciples could not properly understand it. (TLSB)

The dative "madevi – to no one" of the indefinite pronoun "madeis, - no one," is the indirect object of the aorist subjunctive "eipate – say, tell." The indefinite pronoun with "ma – also functions as the negative particle that, together with the subjunctive, forms a negative command or prohibition. One could also translate the clause as "do not tell the sight to anyone." (CC p. 862)

I have rendered the neuter singular noun "vision" (only here in the Gospels) as "sight." In modern English, "vision" could refer to something that was only experienced internally by those to whom it was granted. In biblical usage, "vision" can refer to dreams and visions perceived only in the mind of the recipient. However, "visions" can also refer to events in history visible to everyone present, and these kinds of things that were seen include the events of the transfiguration. Given the continuous physical presence of Jesus himself before, during, and after the "sight" on the mountain, there can be no doubt that what happened involved objective (real, historical), publicly visible and audible realities. (CC p. 862)

The contradiction is once more right in their faces: their Master seems determined to head toward death. The glory of Jesus' appearance and the fearful divine presence and powerful voice of the Father were all incomplete. (CC)

**UNTIL THE SON OF MAN HAS BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD** – This "until," clause certainly envisions at time for the reversal of the main clause: "after the Son of Man is raised, then the disciples should "tell the sight." (CC p. 862)

**17:10 *Elijah must come?*** The scribes taught, on the basis of OT prophecy (Mal 4:5–6), that before the Messiah came, Elijah would reappear. If Jesus was the Messiah, the disciples wondered whether Elijah's appearance in this vision fulfilled the prophecy. (TLSB)

† The traditional eschatology of the teachers of the law, based on Mal 4:5–6, held that Elijah must appear before the coming of the Messiah. The disciples reasoned that if Jesus really was the Messiah, as the transfiguration proved him to be, why had not Elijah appeared? Jesus repeats (vv. 11–13) his assertion (11:14) that the prophecy concerning Elijah has been fulfilled in John the Baptist (cf. Lk 1:17). (CSB)

**17:11** Jesus agreed with the scribes' interpretation. (TLSB)

**17:12** *Elijah has already come.* John the Baptist did the work of the new Elijah. Unfortunately, John's ministry ended abruptly (14:10). (TLSB)

*suffer at their hands.* Jesus knew He would suffer the same fate as John. (TLSB)

*In the same way.* As John the Baptist was not recognized and was killed, so Jesus would be rejected and killed. (CSB)

**17:13** The disciples now grasped what Jesus had taught earlier about John (11:14). (TLSB)

The evangelist's words send his hearers/readers quickly back to chapter 11, where Jesus has already said about the imprisoned and imperiled John, "And if you are willing to receive (it), he himself is Elijah, who is going to come. However we imagine what has gone on in their minds, fulfills the prophecy of end-time restoration given through the prophet Malachi. As their continued obtuseness in the narrative shows, however, they do not realize fully the implication of Jesus' words about John or about Jesus Himself.

**17:1–13** The transfiguration of Jesus confirms for the disciples that He truly is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, as Peter confessed (16:16). The transfiguration is a foretaste of coming glory: Christ's resurrection and His earthly appearances afterward, His ascension, and finally heaven. Comfort one another with these words. Though we are still troubled by the cares and ills of earthly life, every believer shares in the vision of what is to come (1Jn 3:2). • "'Tis good, Lord, to be here! Yet we may not remain; But since Thou bidst us leave the mount, Come with us to the plain." Amen. (LSB 414:5) (TLSB)

### *The Healing of a Boy With a Demon*

**14** When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. **15** "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. **16** I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him." **17** "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." **18** Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that

moment. <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” <sup>20</sup> He replied, “**Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.**” <sup>22</sup> When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, “**The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. <sup>23</sup> They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.**” And the disciples were filled with grief.

**17:14** *when they came.* The next morning. (TLSB)

**17:15** *have mercy.* This father’s desperate plea echoed the cry of the Canaanite woman (15:22). (TLSB)

*seizures.* See note on 4:24. (CSB)

**17:16** Perhaps took place when Jesus was on the mountain (v 1). Their failure to heal the boy while Jesus was transfigured would emphasize the contrast between heavenly glory and the grip the devil still has on earthly affairs. (TLSB)

**17:17** UNBELIEVING AND PERVERSE GENERATION – Jesus lumped His disciples with all those whom He had previously denounced with similar words (12:39, 45; 16:4). (TLSB)

Jesus stern words of frustration must be addressed to His own disciples, especially the nine whom He did not take up the mountain. There is precedent for Jesus speaking to His disciples almost as if they were His opponents. In 7:5, Jesus says, “Hypocrite!” to His disciples if they fall into the danger of judging their brothers. Similarly, this “generation” here in 17:17 refers to His own disciples. Yet it may be significant that here Jesus calls them “faithless and crooked” but not “evil and adulterous” (as He calls this “generation” of skeptics who demand a sign in 12:39 and 16:4; cf. also “this evil generation” in 12:45). (CC)

HOW LONG – Hebrews 5:11-14

He would not be with them much longer. The disciples’ lack of faith prompted Jesus to ask these rhetorical questions, which expressed His disappointment. (TLSB)

**17:18** Not all seizures were the result of demon possession, but these were. (CSB)

The disciples cast out demons (cf 6:13), but they could not overcome this one (cf v 19). Jesus, who had just heard the voice of His Father, readily conquered this mute demon. “[The devil] often breaks men’s necks or drives them to insanity, drowns some, and moves many to commit suicide and to many other terrible disasters [e.g., Mark 9:17–22]. So there is nothing for us to do upon earth but to pray against this archenemy without

stopping. For unless God preserved us, we would not be safe from this enemy even for an hour” (LC III 115–16). (TLSB)

**17:19** WHY COULDN'T WE – *only by prayer*.† The disciples apparently had taken for granted the power given to them or had come to believe that it was inherent in them. Lack of prayer indicated they had forgotten that their power over the demonic spirits was from Jesus (see 3:15; 6:7, 13). Faith works through prayer (see v. 23). (CSB)

They had previously been successful in casting out demons (10:8). (TLSB)

In Mark 9:29 Jesus explains this further. Comments from that verse follow:

The disciples had been tempted to believe that the gift they had received from Jesus was in their control and could be exercised at their disposal. This was a subtle form of unbelief, for it encouraged them to trust in themselves rather than in God. They had to learn that their previous success in expelling demons provided no guarantee of continued power. Rather the power of God must be asked for on each occasion in radical reliance upon His ability alone. When faith confronts the demonic, God's omnipotence is its sole assurance, and God's sovereignty is its only restriction. This is the faith which experiences the miracle of deliverance. (Lane)

Prayer is the act by which we divest ourselves of all false belongings and become free to belong to God and God alone. Prayer is such a radical act because it requires us to criticize our whole way of being in the world, to lay down ourselves and accept our new self, which is Christ...Prayer therefore is the act of dying to all we consider to be our own and of being born to a new existence which is not of this world. (Henri Nouwen in “Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation” – M. Robert Mulholland Jr.)

**17:20** *little faith*. Jesus had several times admonished His disciples for their weak faith (8:26; 14:31; 16:8). He had given them authority to cast out demons (10:8), but their doubts prevented them from healing this boy. (TLSB)

*mustard seed*. See 13:31–32 and notes. (CSB)

Jesus used figurative language to teach that faith as tiny as a mustard seed could do great things, such as moving a huge mountain. (TLSB)

The point of the parable of the Mustard Seed is that the mustard seed, although it begins as a very small reality, grows into something very large (13:31-32; similar is the message of the parable of the Leaven in 13:33). The disciples' faith is still small; it has not yet become faith like a mustard seed. It has not grown. (CC)

First, there is comfort here. Faith that is little but not yet like a mustard seed is still Christian faith. (CC)

Second, Jesus' teaching offers a challenging invitation regarding the goal of learning how to trust Christ more. How does one come to have faith like a mustard seed? Ultimately, the answer simply must be that God grants such faith; He alone creates and sustains and gives growth to faith. (CC)

Disciples cannot improve their faith themselves, but they can turn to and rely on Jesus. They can listen attentively to the promises and teachings of Jesus, for His teaching comes with authority. As the seed of His Word is scattered around, it carries within itself the power to grow and produce remarkable fruit. (CC)

MOUNTAIN MOVE – How are Jesus' disciples to understand the sweeping promises with which His teaching concludes? (CC)

In the first place, Jesus' assurance that the disciples will be able to command the movement of mountains probably reflects a common expression that means "to do what seems to be impossible" and so should not be pressed too literally. The majority of the commentators seem to concur in taking the saying about moving mountains as an overstatement or hyperbole. (CC)

Second, Christ's concluding promise summarizes the intent of His statements about moving mountains: "and nothing will be impossible for you." These words are not isolated from the situation in which they occur. (CC)

*nothing will be impossible for you.* Jesus made this promise to His disciples in the context of their mission as His representatives (10:1–8; Php 4:13). (TLSB)

**17:14–20** Jesus heals a demon-possessed boy whom His disciples have been unable to help. Their faltering faith has let down a seriously afflicted person. Sometimes our weak faith may do the same. When we express our own doubts and fears, family members and friends may be led to question God's promises. Yet the strength of our faith does not flow from us but is the work of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament. Our prayer must ever be: "Lord, increase our faith." • Lord Jesus, give me great faith, that I may receive the fullness of the gifts You promise. Amen. (TLSB)

**17:22** *gathering.* Apparently Jesus and His disciples separated for a time prior to their journey to Jerusalem for Passover (19:1). (TLSB)

*delivered.* Gk *paradidomi*. Lit, "handed over." Term used throughout Jesus' Passion (cf LXX Is 53:6, 12). Jesus foretold His death and resurrection for a second time (cf 16:21). (TLSB)

The second prediction of Christ's death, the first being in 16:21. (CSB)

The ministry in the north is drawing to a close, and soon the journey south to Jerusalem will begin. (CC)

These betrayals and rejections are tragic in that one of Jesus' closest disciples – one of the Twelve, an apostle – and the leaders of the very people whom He has come to save from their sins all cooperate in rejecting Him. (CC)

**17:23 WERE FILLED WITH GRIEF** – All of this is beyond the ken of the disciples now. As with the first passion prediction, again they simply do not seem to hear the promise of resurrection. (CC)

Peter had rebuked Jesus when He first spoke of His death (16:22). Now the disciples felt helpless in grief and sorrow with no comprehension of the resurrection. Cf Jn 11:16. (TLSB)

**17:22–23** Jesus has to tell His disciples repeatedly that He is going to suffer, die, and rise. Love prompts our Lord to repeat those things the disciples need to hear. Christians hear these same events proclaimed again and again. We annually observe the Lenten season and relive Christ's suffering and death. Each year, we celebrate His glorious resurrection. We never grow weary of hearing this story of God's love and our salvation. • Dear Jesus, lead me to ponder and love those truths that declare my salvation. Amen. (TLSB)

### *The Temple Tax*

**<sup>24</sup> After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" <sup>25</sup> "Yes, he does," he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?" <sup>26</sup> "From others," Peter answered. "Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. <sup>27</sup> "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."**

I might cautiously suggest that 17:24-27 is located where it is because it offers a stunning theological interpretation of the events that Jesus has said are about to happen to Him. (CC)

When we encounter a saying or an incident that is found only in one of the evangelists, then we may reasonably assume that it is located where it is for a reason. And Matthew of Capernaum, the former tax collector, is a masterful and deliberate author who has given us the second passion prediction that is followed immediately by the little incident, found only in Matthew, that deals with the temple tax and the question of whether Jesus and His disciples are to pay that two-drachma tax. (CC)

We may proceed on the assumption that the two units are closely related. I would suggest, in fact, that the somewhat odd account regarding the paying of the temple tax stands where it does because it is a commentary on the second passion prediction. In order to support that claim, a review of the origins and purposes of the temple tax is necessary. (CC)

The historical origins of the tax are generally traced to Neh 10:32-33). In 445 BC, almost a century after the first Judeans had returned from exile in Babylon, the community voluntarily instituted a new tax of a third of a shekel to be levied annually. The Judeans pledged:

We assume the obligation to keep commands to give for ourselves a third of a shekel per year for the service of the house of our God, for the showbread, the continual grain offering, the continual burnt offering, the Sabbath offerings, the New Moon offerings, for the appointed festivals, and for holy offerings, and for sin offerings to atone for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. (CC)

Apparently the amount changed over four centuries from a third of a shekel to half a shekel (that is, two drachmas) by the time of Jesus. The general scholarly supposition is that this increase in the tax was somehow connected with the much earlier (ca. 1440 BC) levy of half of a shekel that God had commanded Moses to take from the people in Exodus 30:11-16 to support the tent of meeting and the services therein. Josephus states that in the first century AD in Babylon, Jews had specific storehouses where they deposited “the two drachma tax” that was designated for God and “other offerings.” On one hand, we do not know what percentage of adult Jewish men in Jesus’ day faithfully paid the annual tax. On the other hand, it is reasonable enough to accept what has emerged as the common view in scholarship about what is meant, at least in theory, when someone paid the tax. This view finds support in Ex 30:11-16 and Neh 10:32-33) and is consistent with Mt 17:24-27. A citation from Thompson can suffice:

This annual donation was used for the sacrifices in the Temple. It was one of the few means available to Jews throughout the world for maintaining contact with the religious center in Jerusalem and for participating in the cultic practices which symbolized their relation to God. The half-shekel was a visible sign of their religious unity and solidarity, and served as ransom-money for the atonement of their sins. (CC)

After citing Philo of Alexandria to the effect that the tax functions as a “ransom for our own soul,” Thompson continues:

Against this background, whoever paid the half-shekel to the Temple expressed his allegiance to the Jewish community and his desire to share in the sacrifices which made atonement for sin. (CC)

If the above comments adequately express the significance of the Jewish temple tax in the time of Jesus, we are now ready to gain some insight into this little unit that follows the second passion prediction, and to see why it is placed where it is. The four verses are easily divided into two parts (17:24-25a and 17:25b-27). Initially, Peter is approached by the people who are collecting this tax in Capernaum, and in response to their question about whether Jesus pays the tax, Peter answers simply and in the affirmative (17:24-25a). After Peter has entered the house, however, Jesus intercepts him with His own veiled question about the way taxation works in the wider world (17:25b). After Peter's brief answer, Jesus' teaching reveals that a new situation now pertains for Himself and His disciples in relation to the temple and the sacrificial system that is supported by the temple tax (17:26). (CC)

The unnamed persons who have the responsibility of collecting the temple tax assume that Jesus is in the habit of paying this annual levy that signals a man's intent to identify with and benefit from the temple's sacrificial system. (CC)

After Peter enters the house, Jesus intercepts him before the apostle has any chance to ask him about Jesus' compliance with the tax policy. The Lord poses an unusual question about taxation in general, as it is carried out in the wider world of human society. Presumably the "sons" of the kings of the earth (17:25) are close male relatives of the royal family and perhaps the literal biological children of the kings. In a somewhat unexpected turn of phrase, Jesus divides people into two groups: "sons" and "strangers." Despite the unusual form of the question, the answer seems clear enough, and Peter gets it right. N, earthly rulers do not tax their own princely offspring, but rather those are of a lesser status. (CC)

Working from Peter's correct answer on the level of literal language, Jesus draws a provocative conclusion that is meant to apply on the deeper theological level and in relation to the temple tax, which gave rise to the interaction in the first place: "then indeed the sons are free" (17:26). Who are the "sons" in Jesus' response? In the first place, Jesus is a son, namely, the Son of David (e.g., 1:1; 9:27), the Son of Abraham (1:1), the Son of God (e.g., 2:15; 3:17; 16:16), and the Son of Man (e.g., 8:20; 16:28; 17:22). It is about Jesus' own practice that the question first arose. In the second place and somewhat unexpectedly, Peter (as well as the other disciples) is included in the category of "sons." (CC)

In the illustration, Jesus and His disciples are the "sons" who are not taxed by the king. In the context, the "tax" is the temple tax, and the "king" must be God the Father. God does not ask or expect the sons – Jesus and His disciples – to support the temple in Jerusalem and specifically its sacrificial system. How can this be? (CC)

Herein, I would suggest, with others, lies the connection with the second passion prediction, although the theology remains latent and only implicit at this point in Matthew's Gospel. Because Jesus is about to be handed over and killed and raised from the dead on the third day (17:22-23), God no longer requires or even desires for His people to provide animals and supplies for the sacrifices of atonement at the temple (17:24-26). Jesus Himself possesses, by divine right, a status of "Son" that exempts Him from any thought of needing the atoning sacrifices. In Him and His reign-of-God ministry, something greater than the temple is here. To be specific, now present in Jesus is that reality toward which the atoning sacrifices had always pointed, namely, the Son of Man, who will give His life as the ransom payment for the many (20:28). Moreover, because Jesus' disciples are now following Him in faith (even if it is "little-faith"!) as He moves toward the completion of His ministry, they already possess the status of "sons" and are in no way bound by God the King to support the temple offerings and animal sacrifices. They are in that sense free. (CC)

Matthew 17:27 concludes this remarkable unit. In compassion for those who could not possibly understand the reason why Jesus might not pay the two-drachma tax, Jesus provides the amount in exchange for Himself and for Peter. (CC)

Whatever the significance of 17:27 might be, it is subsidiary to the real and breathtaking claim that Jesus has made in 17:26. His status and work have bestowed upon His disciples a new and exalted status as sons of the King. What is dismaying, though perhaps not unexpected, is the way that the disciples take their twisted comprehension of that new status and approach Jesus with their next question (18:1). That question will lead into the fourth major discourse in Matthew's Gospel: Jesus' teaching about caring for the greatest in the reign of heaven (18:1-35). (CC)

**17:24** *two-drachma tax*. The annual temple tax required of every male 20 years of age and older (Ex 30:13; 2Ch 24:9; Ne 10:32). It was worth half a shekel (approximately two days' wages) and was used for the upkeep of the temple. (CSB)

Every adult Jewish male paid this annual tax (about two days' wages) to support the Jerusalem temple. (TLSB)

**17:25** Jesus referred to the practice of earthly kings, who did not collect taxes from their own sons. (TLSB)

**17:26** *the sons are exempt*. The implication is that Peter and the rest of the disciples belonged to God's royal household, but unbelieving Jews did not (see 21:43). (CSB)

Just as the sons of earthly kings were not obligated to pay taxes, so Jesus, as the Son of the heavenly King, was free from the temple tax. (TLSB)

**17:27** *not to give offense.* Jesus did not want to give others a reason to fault Him for refusing to pay the temple tax. (TLSB)

*hook.* Cf Jb 41:1; Ezk 29:4; Am 4:2. (TLSB)

*find a shekel.* The way in which Jesus provided for payment of the tax showed how much greater than the temple He was (12:6). (TLSB)

**17:24–27** Jesus submits to paying the temple tax so as not to cause offense. He who calmed the stormy sea and fed the multitudes with scant provisions humbled Himself to the requirements of the Law. Likewise, He humbled Himself to death on the cross (Php 2:6–8) to pay the penalty for our sins of pride and tax evasion and all the rest. His righteousness sets us free. • Lord Jesus Christ, keep me humble in my words and actions, ever walking in Your ways. Amen. (TLSB)