

Dr. David Turner, Matthew

Lecture 8A – Matthew 17: The Transfiguration of Jesus

Well, greetings again, this is David Turner. Welcome to Lecture 8A in our Matthew class. You should have your supplemental materials open to page 33 for the outline of this lecture.

We're going to cover today in this lecture, Matthew 17, and do it in the same way that we handled Chapter 16. First, handling the chapter expository is going over it, laying out its flow, and then picking out some key exegetical and theological issues. As you can see on your notes, the chapter seems to divide itself naturally into four sections.

First, the transfiguration of Jesus, the healing of a demon-possessed boy, the matter of paying the temple tax, and finally, the summary of the chapter. First, we want to look at the transfiguration of Jesus. Remember that Chapter 16, verse 28, ends in that statement that some of you who are here will not taste death until you see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, 16:28.

That passage is capable of many explanations, as we noticed in our last lecture. The one I personally favor ties it into the narrative before us right here, the transfiguration, and would argue that the transfiguration is, in a sense, a picture, a glimpse, if you will, of the power of the kingdom, which will eventually come in fullness and in completeness when our Lord Jesus returns to this earth. The disciples were given a foretaste of that here in the transfiguration.

The transfiguration of Jesus is described rather briefly in just the first three verses of Chapter 17, and verses 4 to 13 describe the disciples' response to it and the teaching of Jesus that occurred in light of it. This incident of the transfiguration becomes the backdrop, then, for two significant incidents for the disciples. In the first, Peter's hasty response to the glory of the Lord is corrected by the same heavenly voice first heard at Jesus' baptism.

It's important to compare 17:4-8 to 3:17, and notice that the Father calls the Son his beloved one, and in 17, tells the disciples to listen to him, sort of quashing Peter's idea that there should be sort of a Bible conference going on there with Moses and Elijah and Jesus equally holding forth. As great as Moses and Elijah are, the Father says, listen to Jesus. A second significant incident is Jesus once again forbidding the disciples to make him known, and that occurs in Chapter 17, a little bit further on in that chapter.

Verse 9, I guess, is where it occurs. Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. This reminds us of 16:20, and it leads to the disciples' question about the future coming of Elijah in 17:9-13. Jesus answers that question about the coming of Elijah rather cryptically in terms of a past coming of Elijah when he compares his own future suffering to what has happened to this so-called Elijah.

At that point, the disciples figure out that Jesus is speaking of John the Baptist. It is indeed a complicated matter to understand how John, in a sense, fulfills Malachi 4:5, and 6, even though he denied he was Elijah in John 1 when he was asked. Nevertheless, in Luke 1, Zacharias, John's father, is told that he will come in the spirit and power of Elijah.

So, it appears that Jesus is speaking of John as the coming of Elijah and refers to his own suffering as answering to what has already happened to John's suffering. And that's where the disciples pick up on all this. So overall, this passage contains the Transfiguration proper, 17:1-3, a lesson on the prominence of Jesus, 17:4-8, and a lesson on the continuity of John the Baptist with Elijah of old and with Jesus himself in the present, 17:9-13. Now, there's not too much that will need to be said about the healing of the demon-possessed boy in verses 14-21.

The story of the exorcism and healing of this boy has two main parts, the first dealing with the healing itself in verses 14-18, and the second with a question raised by Jesus' disciples in verses 19-21. In both parts of this, there is a request in the first part in verses 14-16 and in the second part in verse 19. And there's also a response from Jesus in both parts, in the first part, verses 17-18, and in the second part, verses 20-21.

In both parts of it, 14-18 and 19-21, the inability of the disciples is contrasted with the power of Jesus. Note their inability in verses 16-19 and Jesus' power in verses 18-20. The problem throughout this brief episode is the lack of faith, both on the part of Jesus' contemporaries, verse 17, and on the part even of his own disciples, in verse 20.

So, the attentive reader is already attuned to these themes from earlier narratives in Matthew and is not surprised by these difficulties. More on the lesson for the disciples, as you can see, in the second half of this lecture. Now, moving on to verses 22-27, Jesus predicts his death and pays his tax.

This passage, as you might guess from the way I've given the heading of it, contains two elements. The first one is another prediction of Jesus' suffering and death in verses 22 and 23, followed by an incident concerning the payment of the temple tax in verses 24-27. The narrative of the temple tax incident has Peter answering two questions, the first from the temple tax collectors in verses 24 and 25a, and the second question from Jesus in verses 25b to 26a.

The rest of the passage, 26b and 27, contains Jesus' teaching on the matter both in principle in the 26b and in practice in 27. For the record, Peter answers the tax collector's question wrongly and Jesus' question rightly. One cannot help but recall that Jesus did not mind offending the Pharisees on the matter of ritual hand-washing in 15:12, but in the spirit of 12:19, which cites Isaiah 42:2, Jesus will not protest the temple tax in 22-15, and compare to that 22-15 to 22, and Romans 13:6 and 7, and 1 Peter 2:13 and 14.

Jesus has previously had cordial relations with tax collectors both at Capernaum and other places, and this only exacerbates his tension with the Pharisees since they don't like the tax collectors. Go back and review 9:9-11. Disciples of Jesus today often get this backwards, treating religious hypocrites with much deference while making loud protest against perceived injustices by sinners. The lesson of 12:19 and 20, citing Isaiah 42:2 and 3, still is needed.

Jesus treated non-religious sinners gently and religious hypocrites harshly, and his disciples should do the same. Forgoing one's liberties for the sake of avoiding offense and furthering the testimony of the kingdom is what Jesus seems to be doing here. He is not obligated to pay the temple tax, nor are his disciples.

The king does not collect taxes from his son and his son's friends. But foregoing one's liberty is something Jesus, it appears, does here, and this is, of course, also a teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 14:13-23, and 1 Corinthians 8:9, 1, and 1 Corinthians 9:19, and following. There is also a striking blend of humility and power in this passage.

Jesus works a miracle in order to submit to the tax collectors and avoid causing them offense in the way he allows Peter to catch the fish and get the coin. Once again, from all this, Peter learns a lesson about the danger of speaking too quickly. Peter was known for that, obviously, and perhaps he's catching on, although later events in Jerusalem will show the opposite.

We can always hope. Well, to summarize the narrative and the exposition of Matthew 17, it's important to note that since 16:5 Matthew has been stressing Jesus' private interaction with the disciples. He has taught them to beware of the Pharisees' teaching in 16:5-11, and he has revealed to them his identity in 16:13-17, also his program for the church in 16:18-20, and his future along with theirs in 16:21-28.

Now, Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah is confirmed miraculously in the Transfiguration. The last mention of John's Elijah-like ministry turns into a passion prediction in 17:12. The healing pericope recalls two familiar themes, the lack of faith on the part of Jesus' generation 17:17 and the little faith of Jesus' disciples in 17:20.

The final mention of Capernaum in Matthew also implies the unbelief of Jesus' adopted hometown compare 11:23 and 24. Capernaum, after all the miracles did there, should have recognized that Jesus' unique sonship would preclude him from needing to pay the temple tax. Nevertheless, Jesus agrees to pay it to avoid causing them to sin, 17:27.

From all the above, it's clear that Matthew 17 is interwoven with a wide array of theological themes prevalent in Matthew. It's also full of the themes which have been preeminent throughout the narrative block which begins in 13:53. Jesus has done many miracles, but his evil contemporaries for the most part still do not believe in him.

The conflict with the Jewish leaders continues and is worsening. But Jesus has faithfully taught his disciples and their little faith is growing. They have accepted with great sadness his clear prediction that he will suffer, die, and rise again in Jerusalem.

But they are still preoccupied with carnal concerns such as who will be the greatest. Compare 18:1 and compare that with 16:23. So there's still much for them to learn about authentic kingdom community before they make the faithful trip to Jerusalem with Jesus.

Now we turn from our expository thoughts on Matthew 17 to some of the significant exegetical and theological issues in the chapter. The first of them is, of course, the transfiguration of Jesus, which is quite an incident for us to ponder theologically as well as spiritually. Lessons for us there as well as profound truths.

First of all, the transfiguration and theology. The transfiguration of Jesus is truly an amazing event, but not one which should be totally unexpected by Matthew's readers. After all, Jesus has been born miraculously according to Matthew 1 and 2, and his ministry has begun with the ringing endorsement of the Heavenly Father in 3:17.

He's done mighty works of compassion, and he has definitively taught the Torah with nothing less than a heavenly authority, 7:29. He has even demonstrated supernatural control of natural processes when he calms storms and feeds thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread. He's promised a glorious return, a judgment of all humans, and a righteous kingdom on the earth.

After his resurrection, he will receive total authority in heaven and on earth, and his presence will accompany the disciples as they take his kingdom message to all the nations until the end of the present age before his return, 28:18-20. So, from this standpoint, thinking of Matthew as a whole, Jesus' glorious transfiguration is in keeping with his status as the Son of God, his fulfillment of the Old Testament

patterns and predictions, and his promise of a future kingdom. The transfiguration is an integral part of Matthew's high Christology and his apocalyptic eschatology.

It authenticates both Jesus' true identity and God's plan to invade this world and rule it forever. By the transfiguration, disciples of Jesus are given a glimpse of who he really is and what he will one day bring to this world. It would seem from this standpoint that we ought to view the transfiguration as a miraculous temporary unveiling of the glory Jesus has had with the Father from all eternity, much in keeping with the language that Jesus uses in John 17 when he prays to the Father and asks the Father for the glory which he once had with him before the world was to be restored to him once he completes the work that the Father has given him to do.

So, the transfiguration of Jesus is not some sort of extraneous glory of God which comes on him from the outside or some sort of subjective perception of Jesus' glory merely by the disciples. Rather, it is their subjective perception of the objective fact that God, for a time, temporarily allowed Jesus' divine glory, which had been veiled since his incarnation, to shine forth. Now, in light of all this, Moses and Elijah are worthy figures, but they are only supporting actors in the redemptive drama which plays out here as the curtain falls.

Moses and Elijah have exited the stage right, and only Jesus remains dead center on the stage of redemptive history. God's command, Listen to Him, in 17:5, becomes teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you of the Great Commission. In other words, the disciples are to learn here that Jesus is their Lord in every sense of that word.

In light of other New Testament texts, the transfiguration should probably be viewed not as the illumination of the man Jesus with an external glory, but as the momentary uncovering of the Son of God's own intrinsic glory, which has been temporarily veiled only to be reassumed at the resurrection and ascension. As we mentioned before, John 17 verses 4 and 5 and verse 24 are relevant here, as is Philippians 2:5 through 11, Colossians 1:16 through 19, and Hebrews 1:1 through 4. Orthodox systematic theologians are challenged by the transfiguration to attempt an explanation of what must be ultimately inexplicable. How can it be that the eternal Son of God came to earth as a genuinely human child? And how were the divine and human natures of Jesus implicated in His transfiguration? Food for thought.

Answers will take all eternity. Now, the matter of lessons for the disciples in Jesus' transfiguration. In this passage, the disciples are presented with two lessons, really, one relating to their deepest spiritual needs and one relating to the perplexing intellectual question.

The first lesson concerns the preeminence of Jesus in the life of the disciples. Confronted with the amazing scene of Moses and Elijah speaking with a gloriously transformed Jesus, Peter proposes the setting up of temporary shelters, sort of like the Feast of Booths, Sukkot, in the Hebrew Bible. He wants these temporary shelters set up so that they can sort of camp out and perhaps have some sort of a camp meeting or outdoor Bible conference type of deal.

We'll never know exactly what he had in mind for these three shelters since his proposal was interrupted by the voice from heaven. But we can be sure that Peter was on the wrong track since his proposal did not promote the sole sufficiency of Jesus for His disciples. Setting up three tents, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus, would have two erroneous effects.

The first would be, if you'll pardon the expression, damning Jesus with faint praise, not really giving Him the glory that is due Him alone. And the second is the irrigation of Moses and Elijah with a status which belongs only to Jesus. As great as Moses and Elijah were, and they certainly were great, they were only servants of God, not His son.

Compare again 3:17. Moses was the prototypical prophet, but he spoke of Jesus as the definitive eschatological prophet whose words must be heeded in Deuteronomy 18:15-19. Elijah's ministry courageously stood for the law of Moses against the worshippers of Baal and the prophets of Baal. Elijah is to be commended and looked up to, for sure. But Jesus, as the definitive teacher of the law, brings it to its ultimate goal, Matthew 5:17 and following.

Therefore, however well-meaning Peter's proposal was, it suggested the unthinkable notion that Moses and Elijah were on the same level as Jesus. Now, this simply will not do, for Jesus alone is the beloved Son who pleases the Father, and Jesus alone must be heard and obeyed. The second lesson has to do with the disciples' understanding of the mysteries of biblical prophecy.

In the plan of God, the ministries of Elijah, John, and Jesus are intricately interwoven. In his own right, John was not Elijah, but he came to minister in the spirit of Elijah, according to John 1:21 and Luke 1:17. John's ministry as the forerunner of Jesus was in the mold of the one spoken of by Isaiah who would prepare the Lord's way, Matthew 3:3, citing Isaiah 40:3. We really don't understand the intricacies of how Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 4:5 and 6, and all these New Testament texts interrelate. But we have to understand that there was some sense in which the prophecy of Elijah's return was fulfilled by John the Baptist, whereas, in my view, it also leaves open an ultimate fulfillment where the person of Elijah does return.

Which perhaps tantalizes us when we look at Revelation 11 as to whether John is one of the so-called two witnesses there. But, of course, that depends on how you

interpret Revelation 11. Now we move on to the next topic here to think about, the little faith of the disciples, which seems to come up rather frequently in Matthew.

In 17:20, their little faith is alluded to. The lesson of this passage about their little faith is clear. Disciples of Jesus, then, as well as now, are vulnerable to taking on the moral and spiritual values of their contemporaries.

Jesus' disciples had little faith, and they lived amongst a faithless and depraved generation. This faithlessness was true even of those in the crowd who, like the man with the epileptic son, believed that Jesus could heal their illnesses. This sort of, quote-unquote, faith operated only in the material realm and did not recognize Jesus for who he was as the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Rather, Jesus was acknowledged only as some sort of a prophetic figure, a prophet, 16:14, 21:11. In contrast to the crowd, Jesus' disciples do have little faith. But it is a genuine faith that confesses the true identity of their Lord.

Look at 14:33 and 16:16. The issue is not the intensity or the amount of faith, but the degree of perception of its object. The power of faith is in the person to whom it's directed.

Jesus' disciples were unable to heal the epileptic boy because they had taken their eyes off Jesus and looked at the obstacles, just as Peter did during the storm when he began to sink back in 14:31. Faith is not believing in faith, but in the Heavenly Father. It is not believing that the Father will do whatever we demand, but believing that the Father can do whatever is best for us.

We cannot assume that God will endorse and perform our selfish bidding, whatever you want to call that theology. Sometimes it's called positive confession. Sometimes it's called name it and claim it.

And it does tend to put us in the driver's seat and God as the one who does what we say. Now, God will not necessarily endorse and perform our selfish bidding. That's up to him, not us.

What is up to us is believing that God is able and that he will empower us to do great things, to extend his kingdom through words and deeds. Now to sum up some of the key themes in Matthew 13:53 through 17:29. These are themes which flow throughout Matthew's narrative and are particularly stressed in this narrative block of material which occurs in between Jesus' parabolic discourse about the way in which the word of the kingdom, the message of the kingdom is received in chapter 13 and his discourse to which we will be turning in our next lecture, the discourse about greatness in the kingdom and spiritual values in the kingdom in chapter 18. So in this, shall we call it inter-discourse section, 13:53 to 17:29, what are the issues that

keep coming up? Well, first of all, certainly the unbelief and opposition to Jesus despite his miracles continues to be underlined here.

First and foremost, this will be found in the opposition of Jesus' homeboys, his hometown folk from Nazareth in 13:53 and following. They knew his origins. His dad was simply a carpenter.

His mother and his brothers were still there. So, they knew all about this person, his humble origins, and because of that, they could not believe who he really was. So that must have particularly hurt Jesus, and it's particularly dramatic that even his own hometown did not believe in him.

The murder of John in the grisly fashion detailed in Matthew 14:1 through 12 is another indication of the opposition and the unbelief of people in high places during the ministry of Jesus. Even the rather positive statements of 16:14 which take Jesus as a prophet or Elijah or John the Baptist returned from the dead really aren't statements of belief in Jesus because, as I've mentioned before, they tend to damn him with faint praise. Jesus is much more than any of those things in 16:14. So the unbelief of that generation is also commented on by Jesus in 17:17. So that theme continues and intensifies in this section.

The second thing that intensifies here is the conflict with the Jewish leaders. We can look at Herod's execution of John the Baptist in 14:10 along those lines, and it's significant that in 17:12 our Lord Jesus says that they have done with John as they wished. Even so, in a similar way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.

So 17:12 tends to take 14:10 as a sort of a preview or a glimpse of the fate of Jesus. And if you study it out carefully in Matthew, it's uncanny how John the Baptist and Jesus have parallel lives in many senses. Finally, Jesus begins to make explicit predictions of his death in this section.

The so-called first passion prediction in 16:21 and the echo in 17:12, the second clear expression of the passion in 17:22-23 all indicate that conflict with the Jewish leaders is intensifying, even though in this section there is not a great deal of episodic stress on that. None of the pericopes specifically stress additional occasions of opposition from the Jewish leaders, but it's clear just the same primarily from the connection of 14:10 with 17:12 and the passion predictions of Jesus, which begin here. But I guess to my mind, what really is stressed in 13:53 to 17:29 is Jesus' focus on his disciples and his ongoing patient teaching of them to develop their faith and to help them grow and to prepare them ultimately for the time when he will depart the earth.

There are several things that come up in this narrative, and let me just briefly list some of them for you to think about. Notice first how the disciples are skeptical of Jesus' power both times that he does a miraculous meal in both the feeding of the

5,000 in 14:15 and following and in the feeding of the 4,000 in 15:33 the disciples do not realize just how powerful Jesus is and that he is able to feed thousands of people with just a few scraps of food. Along those lines their lack of understanding of Jesus' statement about beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees in 16:6 is instructive because all they can think of in 16:6 when Jesus says beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is that he was mad at them because they didn't bring any bread all this after he had already twice fed thousands of people with a few scraps of food.

So, this certainly indicates the disciples' faith was in a sad shape because they had not yet fully comprehended the power of the Lord. Certainly, today we need to continue to comprehend the power of the Lord and not sell him short. Another instance of this was their fear during the storm in 14:26. Also note verses 30 and 31 of chapter 14, where they're afraid that they're about to die, even though they're doing what Jesus has told them to do to get in the boat and go to the other side.

To be fair to the disciples, after they go through this terrible experience and lack faith, notice that when Jesus saves them and stills the storm again, they comment in verse 33, after worshipping Jesus You are certainly God's son, so give some credit where credit is due. Their concern over offending the Pharisees in 15:12 is quite naive. They should realize by now that the Pharisees are going to be offended no matter what Jesus does.

They have a lot to learn there. Their intolerance of the Canaanite woman in 15:23 shows their lack of compassion for those in need. Their lack of understanding of the leaven as I mentioned in 16:6 Peter's three faux pas in 16:21 where he doesn't want Jesus to go to the cross that one takes the cake his suggestion naively that Jesus share preaching duty with Moses and Elijah in 17:4 and 5 and his agreement that the disciples should pay the temple tax in 17:25 show that he has a lot to learn and he is indeed the model disciple so his problems mirror those of the disciples.

The question about Elijah in 17:10 shows they have a lot to learn as do their question about why they are unable to cast out the demon in 17:19 so you see here throughout this time in the narrative Jesus has a great deal of focus and Matthew wishes to bring this out that the disciples have a weak faith but thankfully it is a growing faith they do believe he is the son of God certainly today our faith needs to be developed much as theirs did.