



Group Discussion Guide

For group meetings from December 13 afternoon through December 20 morning

Matthew 17:1-13

Some biblical scholars believe that the event known as “the transfiguration” recorded in (Matthew 17:1-8) is connected directly to what Jesus had said to his disciples six days earlier: that some of them would not see death before they saw him coming in his kingdom (Matthew 16:28). Others believe that this is a reference to his ascension, while others think this is connected to the birth of the New Testament church. The reality is, no one really knows for sure what Jesus was referring to when he said this. What we do know is, less than a week later, he chose to reveal his glory to three of his disciples. He took Peter, James and John with him up on a high mountain; the exact location is unknown though there are several possibilities within a reasonable distance from Caesarea Philippi.

More important than the location was what Jesus chose to do and who he chose to take with him. Peter, James and John formed somewhat of an inner circle among the disciples. There were times Jesus ministered to the crowds. Other times, he focused his attention on the 12 men he had called to follow him. And then there were moments he spent with these three, inviting them into a time of more personal discipleship. In those moments on the mountain, these three saw Jesus “transfigured” ... a verb that also is translated as “changed” or “transformed.” Matthew does not leave this event open to the interpretation of a verb, however. He states that the face of Jesus “shone like the sun” and “his clothes became white as light.” Moses and Elijah then appeared and talked with Jesus. Again, there is no specific reason given for these two Old Testament men to have appeared at this point with Jesus, though several possibilities have been offered by various authors. Both of these men interacted with God on Mount Sinai, both endured suffering in their roles, and both were expected to return during the age of the Messiah.

At this point, Peter spoke to Jesus and offered to build three tents – or booths – at the site to commemorate what had happened. This idea may have come to Peter because of the practice of constructing these during the Feast of Tabernacles. However, Peter was interrupted by the very voice of God coming from a bright cloud. This cloud is the glory of God, also seen in the Old Testament (Exodus 24:15-18, 40:34-38) ... God also spoke from that cloud (Exodus 24:16). The words of God are similar to those He spoke at the baptism of Jesus. The cloud and voice were too much for the three disciples as they fell on their faces in fear. Jesus, as he often did, reassured them and told them not to be afraid. When they looked up once again, Jesus was there alone. While they were descending the mountain, Jesus told them not to tell anyone what they experienced until after he was raised from the dead. This prompted a question from the three men: “why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” To paraphrase their question: “The scribes say Elijah must come before the Messiah comes ... we just saw Elijah, so

why can't we tell anyone that you are the Messiah?" Their view of what the Messiah would do was very different from Jesus actually came to do. They believed he would be a conquering king, rather than a suffering servant. Jesus explained that Elijah had already come (he was referring to John the Baptist and the disciples recognized this a moment later) and the scribes not only didn't recognize him, but killed him. Jesus said as John suffered, he also would suffer.

Matthew 17:14-20(1)

Jesus and the disciples came down from the mountain and made their way to a crowd that had gathered. A man approached Jesus and asked him to heal his son, who he said had seizures. He also told Jesus that he had brought his son to the disciples and they were unable to heal him. Jesus challenged his disciples and the crowd that had gathered, calling them a "faithless and twisted generation" and asked for the son to be brought to him. Jesus cast out the demon that was possessing the young man and causing his physical problems, and he was healed. The disciples then asked Jesus in private why they had been unable to cast out the demon. He simply told them this was because they did not have enough faith. In fact, he explained that all they needed was a very small amount of faith, which indicates the disciples had attempted to heal the young man according to their own power and ability instead of through the power of God. Some Greek manuscripts of Matthew add the following sentence as verse 21: "But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting," and this is based on Mark's account of this same event (Mark 9:14-28). This reinforces Jesus' point that trusting completely in God to work is what is necessary to be used to do His work.

Matthew 17:22-27

Matthew records that Jesus and his disciples made their way to Galilee. Here, Jesus shared a short but direct statement about how he would soon be executed and resurrected (also found in Mark and Luke). The disciples were "greatly distressed" by what Jesus told them. Mark and Luke both add that the disciples were unable to fully understand what Jesus was saying, and that they were afraid to ask him about it (presumably because they did not want to know more details about what already was troubling them).

The men then traveled to Capernaum, where Peter was approached by tax collectors, who were collecting what was known as the temple tax. This was according to a custom that each Jew 20-50 years old was required to pay a tax of half a shekel (two drachmas) each year. The money collected went to support the temple. Because this was a matter of custom and not law, Jesus questioned Peter regarding whether or not he should pay it. Jesus pointed out that as Jews, he and his disciples were not required to pay a tax that had been put in place by their own people because this was not part of God's law. However, he also in this case did not see a reason to "give offense" to those who expected the tax to be paid, so he told Peter to go and obtain a shekel from the mouth of a fish he would catch and give it to the collectors to cover the amount for himself and for Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus chose to take Peter, James and John with him up on the mountain, where they would see his glory revealed and the vision of him speaking with Moses and Elijah?
2. Read verses 6-7. What does it mean to you that Jesus chose to reassure his disciples in this way and encourage them not to be afraid?
3. Notice how Jesus described the way the leaders of Israel treated John the Baptist and the way they would treat him as well (vs. 10-12). What do you think led these leaders to reject both John and Jesus? How do you see this play out in our world today?
4. What do you learn from Jesus' teaching in verse 20? How do you think you need to apply his statement, "nothing will be impossible for you"?
5. The disciples were "greatly distressed" when they heard Jesus again tell them he would be killed and raised on the third day. If you were to put yourself in their place, do you think you would have reacted this way? Why or why not?
6. Jesus chose to pay the tax so as not to offend some who believed he should pay it. How do believe you should apply this same mindset to your own life?