

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 20: The Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-27

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, Matthew 17 is one of the great revelations of the identity of Christ in the whole Gospel. On the mountain the deity and glory of Jesus break through the veil of His humanity, and the Father Himself bears witness from heaven. The appearance of Moses and Elijah, then their disappearance, makes a profound theological statement: the Law and the Prophets find their fulfillment and their goal in Jesus, and now that He has come, He stands alone. The Father's command, "listen to him," echoes Moses' own promise of a prophet like himself to whom Israel must listen, and it settles forever the question of authority. Christ is above Moses and Elijah; the Old Covenant pointed forward to Him, and we now live under the New Covenant, hearing the voice of the Son. Your students need to grasp the supremacy of Christ and the finality of His word.

But this chapter also forms the heart, because it refuses to leave us on the mountain. Jesus leads the dazzled disciples straight back down into a valley of suffering, failure, and small faith. There is a desperate father, a tormented boy, disciples who could not help, and the gentle rebuke of "little faith." The lesson aims to teach your students that the Christian life is lived mostly in the valley, that real faith depends on God rather than on dramatic experiences, and that the glorious Son who shone like the sun is the same Lord who touches frightened people and says, "have no fear."

So teach for both targets. Send your students home marveling at the glory and supreme authority of Christ, settled in their conviction that His word is final. And send them home ready to come down into the valley with honest, dependent, mustard-seed faith, listening to Jesus above every competing voice and trusting Him in the ordinary places where love actually costs something.

Question 1

Student Question:

On the mountain Jesus is transfigured so that "his face shone like the sun" (17:2). What does this brief unveiling reveal about who Jesus truly is, and why would the disciples need to see His glory before walking with Him toward the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by setting the timing Matthew gives us: "after six days" (v. 1), tying this scene directly to Peter's confession and Jesus' first prediction of the cross. The disciples are reeling from the

news that the Messiah must suffer and die. Into that confusion, Jesus gives three of them a glimpse of who He really is.

Describe the transfiguration carefully. The word means a transformation of form; for a moment the disciples see, not a new Jesus, but the glory that had always been there, veiled in His flesh. “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (v. 2). This is the radiance of deity breaking through the ordinary appearance of the carpenter from Nazareth.

Help students see why this mattered for the disciples. They were about to walk a hard road, watching their Lord be rejected, arrested, and crucified. On the mountain they were given an unforgettable witness that the One heading toward the cross was no mere man, but the glorious Son of God who laid down His life willingly. The glory would steady them when the darkness came.

Draw out the doctrine plainly. Jesus is not simply a great teacher or prophet; He is God the Son, possessing a glory that belongs to deity alone. The Transfiguration is one of Scripture’s clearest unveilings of His divine nature, and it prepares us to take seriously everything else He says and does.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deity and divine glory of Christ, briefly unveiled on the mountain (17:2; John 1:14)
- The Transfiguration as a revelation of who Jesus always was, not a temporary change
- The glory of the Son strengthening the disciples for the coming cross
- Jesus as the glorious Son of God, not merely a great teacher or prophet (Hebrews 1:3)
- The willing self-humbling of the glorious Christ who heads toward the cross (Philippians 2:6–8)

Discussion Prompts

- What does the radiance of Jesus on the mountain reveal about who He truly is?
- Why would the disciples need to see His glory before watching Him go to the cross?
- How does knowing Jesus is the glorious Son of God change the way you hear His words?

Question 2

Student Question:

The disciples got one rare glimpse of Christ’s glory and then had to walk by faith again. Where do you need to remember a time God made Himself real to you, so you can keep trusting Him now when His glory is hidden?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question. The disciples received one extraordinary glimpse of glory and then had to come down and live by faith again, just like the rest of us. They could not stay on the mountain; they had to carry the memory into the valley.

Help students recognize their own mountaintop moments: a season when God felt near, an answered prayer, a powerful time of worship, a verse that came alive, a deliverance they cannot explain. God gives such moments not as permanent dwelling places but as anchors for the ordinary days when His glory is hidden.

Encourage them to remember deliberately. When faith feels thin, it is wise to look back and recall the times God proved Himself faithful. The disciples would later draw on this very memory; Peter wrote about it decades afterward as something that steadied his faith (2 Peter 1:16–18).

Be tender with those who feel they have never had a mountaintop experience. The point is not to manufacture dramatic feelings but to trust the God who is faithful whether we feel Him or not. Faith does not live on the mountain; it walks in the valley remembering the mountain.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mountaintop experiences as anchors for ordinary faith, not permanent dwellings
- Remembering God's past faithfulness as a help in present trials (Psalm 77:11–12)
- Walking by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7)
- The faithfulness of God whether or not we presently feel His nearness

Discussion Prompts

- What is one time God made Himself real to you that you can hold onto now?
- How does remembering God's past faithfulness help when His presence feels hidden?
- How would you encourage someone who feels they have never had a mountaintop moment?

Question 3

Student Question:

Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and the Prophets, appear and then disappear, leaving "Jesus only" (17:3, 8). What is God teaching about the relationship between the Old Testament and Christ, in whom the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses and Elijah are not random choices. Moses represents the Law; Elijah represents the Prophets. Together they stand for the entire Old Testament, the whole structure of revelation that had governed God's people for centuries. Their appearance with Jesus signals that He is the One toward whom all of it had been pointing.

Watch carefully what happens next. Peter wants to build three tents, putting Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah. The Father interrupts him, and when the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are gone. The disciples see “Jesus only” (v. 8). The message could not be clearer: the Law and the Prophets have served their purpose; now the Son stands alone, supreme.

Teach the relationship between the Testaments here. The Old Covenant was good and God-given, but it was a shadow pointing to the substance, and the substance is Christ (Colossians 2:17). Jesus did not come to discard the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17), and having fulfilled them, He brings in a New Covenant under which His people now live (Hebrews 8:6–13).

Guard against two errors. We do not despise the Old Testament; it is inspired, profitable, and the very Scriptures that testify of Christ. But neither do we live under the Old Covenant law as our rule; we listen to the Son. The Old points forward; Christ is the goal; and now the Father says, listen to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses and Elijah representing the Law and the Prophets fulfilled in Christ (Matthew 5:17)
- The Old Covenant as a shadow pointing to the substance found in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17)
- “Jesus only” remaining when Moses and Elijah depart: the supremacy of the Son
- Christians living under the New Covenant, not the Old Covenant law (Hebrews 8:6–13)
- The value of the Old Testament as inspired Scripture that testifies of Christ (Luke 24:27)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that Moses and Elijah disappear, leaving Jesus alone?
- How should a Christian rightly value the Old Testament without living under the Old Covenant?
- What does it mean that the whole story of Scripture was pointing toward Christ?

Question 4

Student Question:

The Father commands, “listen to him” (17:5). In practice, what does it look like for you to actually listen to Jesus this week, and where are you currently listening to other voices instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the Father’s command, “listen to him,” and presses it into daily life. To listen, in the biblical sense, is not merely to hear sound; it is to heed, to obey, to order our lives by what is said. The Father is commanding that Jesus have the final word in our lives.

Help students see how many other voices compete for that authority. The voice of culture, of self, of fear, of the crowd, of our own appetites, of well-meaning people who would lead us away from Christ. Each of us is listening to something. The question is whether the loudest voice in our lives is the voice of the Son.

Make it concrete. Listening to Jesus looks like opening His word regularly and doing what it says, bringing decisions under His teaching, obeying even when it is costly or unpopular. It is the opposite of treating His words as suggestions to weigh against everything else.

Ask students to name one specific area where they have been listening to a competing voice, and one concrete step toward heeding Christ instead. The Father did not say admire Him, or discuss Him, but listen to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Listening to Jesus as heeding and obeying, not merely hearing (Luke 6:46)
- The final authority of Christ's word over every competing voice
- Hearing and doing the word as the mark of a wise builder (Matthew 7:24-27)
- Letting Scripture, not culture or self, set the direction of our lives

Discussion Prompts

- What competing voices are loudest in your life right now?
- What would it look like this week to actually heed Jesus, not just admire Him?
- Where is Jesus calling you to obey even though it is costly or unpopular?

Question 5

Student Question:

When the disciples fall down in terror, Jesus touches them and says, "Rise, and have no fear" (17:7). What does this reveal about how the glorious Son of God relates to frightened, failing people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the voice from the cloud, the disciples fall on their faces, terrified (v. 6). It is the right response to the holiness and glory of God; everyone in Scripture who glimpses that glory is undone by it. But watch what Jesus does next. He came and touched them, and said, "Rise, and have no fear" (v. 7).

Linger on that touch. The same Jesus whose face had just shone like the sun, the glorious Son of God before whom they had collapsed, reaches down and lays a gentle hand on trembling men. Glory and tenderness meet in Him. He does not leave them on their faces; He lifts them up.

This is deeply pastoral. Many believers imagine God as distant and severe, ready to crush them for their failures. The Transfiguration shows the opposite: the most glorious One is also the most gentle. He stoops to frightened, failing people and speaks peace.

Help students bring their own fears and failures into the light of this scene. The right response to God's holiness is reverence, but the gospel adds something more: the holy One has drawn near in Christ, who touches us and says, have no fear. We come to Him not as those who must hide, but as those He gently raises up.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The holiness and glory of God rightly producing reverent fear (Isaiah 6:5)
- The tenderness of the glorious Christ toward frightened, failing people (17:7)
- Jesus drawing near rather than standing distant from us
- Reverence and assurance held together in the gospel: the holy One who says, have no fear

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to you that the glorious Son of God stooped to touch terrified men?
- Where do you need to hear Jesus say to you, "Rise, and have no fear"?
- How do we hold together reverence for God's holiness and confidence in His tenderness?

Question 6

Student Question:

Peter wanted to stay on the mountain and build three tents, but Jesus led them back down to a suffering boy and a needy crowd. Where are you tempted to seek spiritual "mountaintop" experiences while avoiding the ordinary, costly work of love in the valley?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns on the descent from the mountain. Peter wanted to stay; he proposed building tents so the glory could linger. But Jesus led them straight down into a valley where a desperate father waited with a suffering boy the disciples could not help. The contrast is deliberate.

Help students see the temptation in Peter's impulse. We can come to love the experience of God more than the work of God. We chase the next conference, the next emotional high, the next mountaintop, while avoiding the ordinary, unglamorous, costly love that waits in the valley: the difficult relationship, the needy neighbor, the slow labor of discipleship.

Make the point clear. Mountaintop moments are gifts, but they are given to equip us for the valley, not to excuse us from it. Real faith is proven not in the dazzling moment but in the daily descent to where people are hurting.

Ask students to name a “valley” of need they have been avoiding while preferring spiritual highs. Then encourage one concrete step of love into that valley this week. The glory on the mountain was meant to send the disciples back down, not to keep them up.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual experiences as equipping for service, not escapes from it
- The danger of loving the experience of God more than the work of God
- Love proven in the ordinary, costly service of the valley (1 John 3:18)
- Coming down to real need as the pattern Jesus Himself sets

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to chase spiritual highs while avoiding costly love in the valley?
- What “valley” of real need is in front of you right now?
- What is one concrete step of love you can take into that valley this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

The disciples could not cast out the demon, and Jesus points to their “little faith,” saying faith like a grain of mustard seed can move mountains (17:19–20). What is Jesus teaching here about the nature and power of genuine faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In the valley the disciples have failed; they could not cast out the demon. When they ask why, Jesus answers, “Because of your little faith” (v. 20). Then He gives the famous saying: faith like a grain of mustard seed could say to a mountain, move, and it would move. Nothing would be impossible.

Be careful to teach this rightly. Jesus is not saying that the amount of faith is what matters, as if we must work up enough faith to force God’s hand. The mustard seed is famously tiny. His point is about the kind of faith, real and living, rather than the size. Even a small genuine faith, resting on the power of God, accomplishes what no human effort can.

The contrast is between “little faith,” which is timid, self-reliant, and easily defeated, and genuine faith, which depends wholly on God. The disciples had perhaps grown self-confident or treated their power as their own. Jesus redirects them to dependence on the God for whom nothing is impossible.

Apply it honestly. The power is not in our faith as a force; it is in the God our faith lays hold of. A weak hand that grips a strong rope is enough. Help students stop measuring their faith and start fixing it on the One who is able.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine faith measured by its object, God, not by its size (17:20)
- The contrast between timid “little faith” and faith that depends on God
- Faith as resting on God’s power, not on the strength of our believing (Mark 9:23)
- Dependence on God as the heart of effective faith and prayer

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus point to a tiny mustard seed when teaching about powerful faith?
- What is the difference between trusting in our faith and trusting in the God our faith holds?
- How does this teaching free us from anxiously measuring how much faith we have?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus says this kind of faith is exercised through dependence on God. Where in your life is your faith currently small, and what would it look like to take one real step of trusting and depending on God there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question follows the teaching on faith into the student’s own life. The disciples’ failure came from “little faith,” a faith too timid and self-reliant to depend fully on God. Most of us recognize that struggle.

Help students locate the specific area where their faith is currently small. For one it may be a besetting sin they doubt God can free them from. For another it may be a relationship, a financial fear, a prodigal child, or a calling they keep refusing because the obstacle looks too big. Naming the place is the first step.

Then move toward action. Genuine faith is not a feeling we summon but a step we take in dependence on God. The point of the mustard seed is that we do not need to manufacture enormous faith; we need to take a real step of trusting the God who is able, however small that step seems.

Encourage one concrete act of dependence this week: a prayer prayed in earnest, an obedience offered despite fear, a problem entrusted to God instead of carried alone. Faith grows as it is exercised, like a muscle, by being used in real dependence on a faithful God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith expressed through concrete steps of dependence on God
- The growth of faith through exercise and obedience (Romans 10:17)

- Bringing our specific fears and impossibilities to the God for whom nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37)
- Honest acknowledgment of weak faith as the doorway to greater trust (Mark 9:24)

Discussion Prompts

- Where is your faith currently small, and what makes it feel that way?
- What is one concrete step of trusting and depending on God you could take this week?
- How have you seen your faith grow in the past when you stepped out in dependence?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 17:1–8 together with the Father’s words, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” What does the Transfiguration reveal about the unique glory and authority of Christ over Moses and Elijah, over the Law and the Prophets, and what does it mean for us today that the Father has commanded us to listen to His Son above every other voice?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest question of the lesson, so center the class on 17:1–8 and especially the Father’s words from the cloud. Read them slowly: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (v. 5). This is one of the rare moments in the Gospels when the Father speaks audibly from heaven, and every word carries weight.

Unfold what the voice declares. First, “this is my beloved Son”: an assertion of the unique deity and sonship of Jesus. He is not a son in the way Israel or angels are called sons; He is the beloved Son, the eternal Son of the Father. Second, “with whom I am well pleased”: the Father’s full approval rests on Him, and on no other. Third, and most pointed, “listen to him.” The command settles the question of authority for all time.

Now connect the command to its Old Testament root. Moses had promised, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you. It is to him you shall listen” (Deuteronomy 18:15). On the mountain stand Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets in person, and the Father directs the disciples not to them but to Jesus. When the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are gone, and only Jesus remains. The Law and the Prophets have done their work; now the Son alone holds the floor. He is greater than Moses, greater than Elijah, the One they both foretold.

Draw out what this means for us today. The Father has spoken His final word in His Son (Hebrews 1:1–3). We are not waiting for new revelation, additional prophets, or further mountains; the complete New Testament gives us the voice of the Son, and that voice is supreme over every other authority, every tradition, every competing teacher. To listen to Jesus is not optional; it is the Father’s direct command from heaven.

Close by pressing this home with both reverence and warmth. The same glorious Son whom the Father commands us to hear is the One who touched the trembling disciples and said, have no fear. So we listen to Him not in dread but in glad submission, certain that the One who speaks with all authority also loves us, gave Himself for us, and leads us down into the valley as our faithful Lord. The whole Christian life flows from this command: listen to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Father's direct testimony to the unique deity and sonship of Christ (17:5)
- Jesus as the prophet greater than Moses, to whom we must listen (Deuteronomy 18:15; Acts 3:22–23)
- The supremacy of Christ over Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets
- "Jesus only" remaining: the finality and sufficiency of the Son
- God speaking His final word in His Son, with the complete New Testament as our authority (Hebrews 1:1–3; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- No expectation of new revelation or additional prophets beyond the Son
- Glad submission to Christ's authority, grounded in His love and self-giving

Discussion Prompts

- What does each phrase of the Father's declaration teach us about who Jesus is?
- How does the disappearance of Moses and Elijah underline the supremacy of Christ?
- What does it mean for your daily life that the Father has commanded you to listen to His Son above every other voice?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole chapter, from the blazing glory on the mountain to the temple tax in the valley. Name one specific way the Father's command, "listen to him," is calling you to follow and trust Jesus more fully this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole chapter, which moves from blazing glory on the mountain to a quiet miracle about the temple tax in the valley. Remind the class of the throughline: the Father's command, "listen to him," governs every scene. The glorious Son is the one to hear, and hearing Him leads us down into real life.

Touch briefly on the closing scene about the temple tax (17:24–27). Jesus shows He is the free Son of the King, yet He graciously pays the tax so as not to give needless offense, even providing the coin through a quiet miracle. It is a small picture of the whole chapter: the One with all authority and glory stoops, serves, and accommodates Himself to others in love. Listening to Him means following Him in that humility.

Encourage students to be specific in their response. A real answer might sound like: “I will start each day in His word and do one thing it says,” or “I will go down into the valley of that hard relationship instead of avoiding it,” or “I will bring my small faith to Him about this fear.” Vague resolutions fade quickly.

Close with worship rather than mere resolve. The wonder of Matthew 17 is that the One whose face shone like the sun, the beloved Son of the Father, is the same Lord who touches frightened people, heals suffering children, and stoops to serve. Lead your class to marvel at His glory, to rest in His love, and to leave with one clear way they will listen to Him this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of Christ’s glory and His humble, serving love (17:24–27)
- “Listen to him” as the governing principle of the whole Christian life
- Specific, concrete obedience as the fruit of truly hearing Christ
- Worship and glad submission flowing from the glory and love of the Son

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from Matthew 17 the Father most wants you to take to heart?
- What specific way will you listen to and follow Jesus this week?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?