

THE RULE OF GOD COMES THROUGH JESUS CHRIST ALONE

Matthew 17: 1-13

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a teacher or an employer that you enjoyed obeying? Have you ever had a teacher or an employer that you had difficulty obeying? What made the difference?

What makes the difference between people that you like to depend upon and people you don't like to depend upon?

We enjoy obeying and trusting people who appear to us honorable and reliable. It is easy to cooperate with those who we are convinced love us and have our best interests at heart. It is a pleasure to depend on those who we know will not use our vulnerability against us. When we are convinced that a person is admirable, principled and worthy of our trust and obedience, then we enjoy trusting and obeying that person. It is the chief work of the Holy Spirit through the Holy Scripture to persuade us that Jesus Christ is the most impressive person in the universe. This passage especially aims to convince us that Jesus Christ is the most glorious person and ought to be loved, trusted and obeyed.

STUDY

1. Matthew rarely fixes the events he narrates chronologically. However, he makes sure that we know when the transfiguration of Jesus occurs by saying, "After six days..." Summarize what happened six days prior to the transfiguration.

Six days prior to the transfiguration the apostle Peter, speaking for the other disciples, confesses that Jesus is the long awaited Jewish Messiah and Savior of the world. Jesus explains that Peter didn't come to this conclusion because he's smarter or more "spiritually sensitive" than others but because Jesus' Father chose to reveal this knowledge to him and the other disciples. Jesus then goes on to explain that he, the

Jewish Messiah must suffer at the hands of the Jewish leaders and be killed and then rise from the dead. Peter then rebukes Jesus for talking so foolish. Jesus then rebukes Peter and calls him Satan and accuses him of trying to turn Jesus away from doing his Father's will. Then he goes on to describe what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is a person who dies to his demands to be made happy in this life, and denies himself the pleasures of this world because he is so delighted to be loved by God and to belong to Jesus. It is six days after these events that Jesus takes John, Peter, and James up on a mountain and is transfigured before them.

2. Why does Jesus give a man who he just called Satan such a glorious revelation of himself but refuse to give any help to the Pharisees and Sadducees (see 16: 1-4)?

He does this because "he has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden." (Romans 9: 10-21) There is no explanation for why Jesus is so kind to Peter, James and John other than his own grace and mercy. These men have obviously not earned the right to have Jesus do such an incredibly kind thing. God the Father, out of the pleasure of his own will, for the glory of his own name (Eph. 1: 4-6), has mercy on these sinful men.

3. What do the following passages tell us about Moses and Elijah?
 - Exodus 34: 4-5 *Moses went up on a mountain and the Lord revealed his glory to him in the cloud and spoke to him.*
 - 1 Kings 19:8-13 *Elijah went up Mt. Horeb and the Lord revealed his glory to him and spoke to him*
 - Deuteronomy 18: 15-19 & 34:10-12 *God told Moses that he would raise up a prophet like him that the people must listen to. This prophet would have to do mighty signs, greater than Moses did. To not listen to this prophet would exclude a person from among the people of God. This is a prediction of Jesus.*
 - Malachi 4:5-6 *Elijah will return before the "day of the Lord" and prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.*
 - Joshua 8: 31-32 & 34-35 *Moses is the author of the "Law". The first five books of the OT are called the "Law of Moses".*

- 2 Kings 2: 9-15 *Elijah is one of the greatest prophets of Israel. He is the only prophet who did not die a natural death but was taken to heaven in the chariot of fire.*

4. What conclusions should we draw as a result of Moses and Elijah showing up to talk with Jesus? (Especially compare the last two points with Matthew 5: 17 and Romans 3:21.)

We are to see in their standing before the transfigured Jesus a repetition of their seeing the glory of God. In other words, they show us that the glory revealed here in Christ is the glory of God. It is a sign that Jesus is not merely human but he is also God. Second, Moses and Elijah appear because they were both prototypes. We are told in Deuteronomy 18 that God was going to send a prophet just like Moses to take his place and to speak words that God's people would listen to. Moses was a picture of the Messiah and so his presence here is his endorsement of Jesus as that greater prophet. Elijah, we are told in Malachi 4, is the forerunner before the coming of the Messiah. Malachi says that Elijah would precede the Messiah and prepare the way for him. As we see in the next few verses Elijah was the prototype of the ministry of John the Baptist. His presence also endorses Jesus as the Messiah.

However, the third and most important reason that Moses and Elijah are present is because they represent the entire OT revelation. The Jews regularly referred to the OT scriptures as "the Law and the Prophets." Moses is the author of the Law and Elijah is the greatest of the prophets. So their presence here shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of the entire OT. He is the pinnacle of God's revelation to men. Their presence verifies what Jesus said in Matthew 5: 17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, I did not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Their presence is saying the same thing the apostle Paul says in Romans 3:21, "But now a righteousness apart from Law has been revealed to which the Law and Prophets testify." Jesus is God's final word to humanity.

Jesus is the most impressive of all beings because he is the climax of God's revelation.

5. Why would Peter think it was good for him to be here? Why would he want to put up three shelters for Moses, Jesus and Elijah? (Reflect upon Peter's last statement prior to this in 16:22.)

What we can hear in Peter's words is something like this. "This is more like it Jesus. I knew you were the Messiah. This is awesome. Wait until the other disciples see Moses and Elijah here to promote you Jesus! I tell you what Jesus, let me set up some tents for you, Moses, and Elijah to sit in and I'll go round up as many people as I can so others can see your glory and so Elijah can begin his work of restoring all things. Don't anybody move, we'll have a revolution in a jiffy once people see this and hear Moses and Elijah endorse you." Peter wants to live in the glory of heaven without the pain of losing his life on earth. He is convinced that Moses and Elijah are here to promote Jesus' glory and so start the revolution. He wants to preserve the moment, not because he loves Jesus but because he loves the experience of heaven on earth. He still is too taken up with the idea of a conquering Savior. He still cannot see the need for or delight in a Messiah who suffers and dies. As A.B. Bruce says, "While Jesus is talking about crosses, Peter is thinking about crowns."

6. God interrupts Peter's enthusiastic babble and says to him, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Why does God say this to these disciples? What is he trying to get them to see that they don't yet see?

God is rebuking Peter for three things. First, Peter treats Jesus, Moses and Elijah as equals. He wants to set up three tents, one for each of these equally magnificent persons. But God shows up and says, "This one, uniquely, is my Son whom I love, with whom I am well pleased." You cannot treat Jesus like Moses and Elijah. They are radically different kinds of persons. The glory of Jesus is infinitely superior to that of Moses and Elijah. It is blasphemous to compare the unique Son of God to mere humans, no matter how great those humans may be.

Second, God tells Peter that he loves and delights in his Son. The implication is that Peter and the other disciples who profess to be worshippers of God ought to love and delight in Jesus as well. This is the point that is made repeatedly in the NT. If you love the Father you will love the Son. If you worship the Father, you will worship the Son.

If you do not love and honor the Son, then you do not love and honor the Father. God is challenging Peter, the disciples and every person who says that they believe in God. If you believe in God then you will love Jesus. If you don't love Jesus then you don't believe in the God who exists. You are worshipping a false god.

The third thing that God is rebuking Peter for is contained in the command, "Listen to him". Is there anything in particular that God wants them to listen to? If you look at v. 1 you will notice that this story is fixed as to its time. They are to listen to and embrace Jesus as the suffering Messiah. They are to abandon their hope in an earthly kingdom and hope in the kingdom of heaven that is still to come. The Messiah must suffer and die if God's kingdom is going to come to this world. Peter and the disciples should repent of their stubborn refusal to see their biggest problem as their own sin rather than the sins of the Roman oppressors and corrupt religious leaders. This is what makes the cross so offensive to us. It forces us to see that the biggest problem we have is our own sin.

Jesus is the most impressive of all beings because he is the unique, divine, Son of God.

7. How do the disciples respond to God speaking to them out of the cloud? Why are they terrified? (Compare with Exodus 20:18-19 & Isaiah 6: 1-5.)

The disciples are terrified by both the presence of God and the words of God. All their giddiness and lust for power evaporates under the fire of God's holiness. They are terrified by God's presence and his declaration of his love and delight in Jesus. They are overcome with fear because they are so aware of their own sin and "unfitness" to be in God's presence. They are aware that God is a consuming fire.

8. While they are cowering in fear of God's judgment, what happens?

While the three disciples tremble in fear with their faces buried in the earth, Jesus comes to them and touches them. He says to them, "Get up. Don't be afraid." Every reference to Jesus touching someone in the gospel of Matthew is for the purpose of healing, of restoring. Here we see Jesus acting as our comforter and Savior from the wrath of God.

He touches the disciples and they look up, see only him, and tell them not to be afraid. What a beautiful picture of conversion. Jesus came to save us from the just wrath of his Holy Father. You will never know the greatness of Christ until you know the greatness of your sin and of God's just anger against you because of your sin. The touch of Jesus alone will heal you from the terror of God's judgment. The only broken heart that Jesus came to heal is the heart that is broken by the guilt of sin, not the heart broken by your boyfriend. The only fear Jesus came to relieve is the fear of God's wrath, not the fear of going broke.

9. Have you known the terror of God's holiness? Do you know the joy of looking up and seeing only Jesus? Are you amazed that you see a merciful Savior rather than a just judge full of wrath against you?

Jesus is the most impressive of all beings because he rescues us from the just wrath of God.

10. As the four of them walk down the mountain Jesus tells the disciples to not tell anyone about what they have seen and heard until after he is resurrected. This is the fifth time in the gospel of Matthew that Jesus has told people not to tell who he is. Why does he say this? (Reflect upon Peter's response in 16:22 to Jesus' talking about his suffering.)

Humans want a Savior who brings heaven to earth, not a Savior who makes them fit for heaven. We're in love with running our own lives and think the earth would be a fine place to live if we could get rid of the disease, war, hunger, poverty, and all those "bad" people. This is the problem we see repeatedly in the disciples' lives. Jesus doesn't want people knowing who he is and so trying to force him to give them a kingdom of this world. The path to the cross is hard enough without adding the problem of overcoming premature enthusiasm for his kingship. Only after his death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit will his disciples understand the nature of God's kingdom and of his salvation and only then will it be safe to let the people know who he truly is.

The question of the disciples and Jesus' response to it are based upon the prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6. "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”

11. What are the teachers of the law saying must happen before the Messiah comes?

The prophet Elijah must come back and restore all things before the Messiah shows up.

12. Why do the disciples ask this question at this moment? (Consider whom they just saw and what Jesus just commanded them in light of the prophecy in Malachi.)

Their question about Elijah reveals hearts that are stubbornly refusing to accept what Jesus is saying. The question of the disciples does not simply want Jesus to clear up a difficult issue. They are protesting Jesus' whole approach. Here is what they are saying. "It is quite clear to us that you are the Messiah. However, you keep talking about dying and now you command us to keep quiet about what we have seen. Since the OT says so clearly that Elijah must come why is it that Elijah, who was just here, has left without fulfilling the promise? Why didn't you keep him here? If you didn't keep him here, why won't you let us talk about the fact that he was here? Another thing; since Malachi says that Elijah will restore all things to prepare for your coming, how can it be that you will be killed? The whole world will be ready for your arrival once he completes his ministry and so who will be left to kill you?" They are not questioning the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. They continue to question Jesus' talk of a suffering Messiah.

13. Does Jesus agree or disagree with the teachers of the law's belief that Elijah must come before the Messiah and restore all things?

He agrees and disagrees with the scribes and with the disciples. First, he agrees that Elijah must come and restore all things before the Messiah shows up. The scribes are correct and so are the disciples. However, they are incorrect in their understanding of what it means for Elijah to come and restore all things. Jesus says that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the Malachi prophecy.

What the scribes and disciples don't get is that no human being is excited about the coming of Elijah or the Messiah. There is this ongoing blindness to the fact that God is building his kingdom by delivering his people from the penalty and power of sin and this requires a suffering Messiah and a response of repentance and faith. Elijah (John) did not come to set the revolution in motion but to prepare people's hearts for this suffering Messiah. But people don't like this message and so they killed John just as they are going to kill Jesus.

14. What do the disciples understand from Jesus' answer? What don't they understand yet?

They understand that Jesus is saying that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy. However, they don't understand what Jesus means about the Son of Man raising from the dead or the Son of Man suffering the same fate as John.

15. Why is Jesus making such a big deal out of his suffering and death? Why won't he quit talking to the disciples (and us) about it? Why is it so hard for the disciples to "get it"?

The suffering and death of Jesus sets him apart from every other religious leader. He is the supreme and only Savior of human beings. His cross is the crossroad for every human being. Human beings are offended by this cross for the same reasons that the disciples were offended. We are only interested in Saviors who promise us heaven on earth, we are not interested in a Savior who wants to make us fit for heaven. We are offended by the suggestion that we are not fit for heaven. We are offended by the claim of the cross that the only way we can be made acceptable to God is by this bloody cross. We are unwilling to accept that we deserve the treatment that Jesus took upon himself for us. We want the crown without the cross.

16. Does your heart rejoice in this great, suffering Savior because he has made you fit for heaven? Or do you yearn to have him give you heaven on earth?

Jesus is the most impressive of all beings because he is the only suffering Savior.