

Transfiguration: Holiness and Love

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[0:00] He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise and have no fear. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen. Now, as I was preparing this introduction, I thought about including a few examples of that phenomenon. But I remember once a seminary classmate ripping a song to shreds, only to find out after class that another classmate was deeply offended because they had sang that song at his father's funeral.

So I don't want to risk a repeat of anything like that. But needless to say, most of us can pretty quickly call to mind examples of what we commonly call the Jesus is my boyfriend song.

Now, as a thought experiment, call one of those songs to mind, and don't blame me if it gets stuck in your head. It's not my fault. Think about it for a second.

Okay. Now compare it to this verse from the hymn we're going to sing as our recessional. Notice the difference there.

[2:16] There is reverence. There is a recognition of the glory, the majesty, the holiness of Jesus that is far too often absent from the way we think about Jesus in the contemporary church.

Now, the opposite error, of course, is also problematic. We can think of Jesus as remote or harsh or unreachable or as unsympathetic. But aside from very specific circles, that error isn't quite as commonplace in the contemporary West.

We tend to think of a Jesus who blandly approves of everything we do, a God who, as C.S. Lewis puts it, is like an overly benevolent grandfather whose plan for the universe is simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day that a good time was had by all.

Really, one way or another, it's easy to end up with an unbalanced portrait of who Jesus is. But our account of the transfiguration this morning really gives us a complete and whole picture of Jesus. We certainly see his divinity and his humanity. We certainly see his holiness and his sympathy with us. We see his glory and we see his approachability. Looking rightly at the transfiguration account, we can think about how the love of God and the holiness of God, the mercy of God and the justice of God meet in Jesus and meet perfectly.

[3:51] Now, we certainly see the holiness of God in our reading from Exodus for this morning, and that's definitely a good thing. God's holiness is something we need to remember. So look with me in Exodus 24, if you would.

I want us to notice something. Now, look at the instructions in the first couple of verses. Moses, Aaron, Aaron's son, 70 of the elders of Israel, they're told to come up and worship from afar. And then what do we see in verse 2? Moses alone shall come near to the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him. So, the vast majority of Israel doesn't come up.

Only Moses comes near. God is, in effect, unapproachable to most of Israel. And then we look at how the presence of God and the glory of God are described.

We see words like cloud. We see words like consuming fire. That doesn't really compare to boyfriend.

[5:03] That's not boyfriend material, we might say. So what does this say about God? Reminds us that he is holy. Utterly set apart.

Transcendent. He is the object of reverence and even fear. He is so holy, so set apart, that almost no one can draw near. We go on to read in Exodus 33 that even Moses, who in chapter 24 is instructed to come near to the Lord, is not able to see God's face.

And why is that? Because God is so holy, so set apart from us, that we cannot see his face and live. God is holy.

God is righteous. God is set apart. God is utterly separated from and opposed to sin. But by nature, we are sinners who cannot look on God and live or even come safely into his presence.

So where does that leave us? Let's think about our gospel text in Matthew 17. What Peter, James, and John see at the Transfiguration seems remarkably similar to what we see in Exodus 24, doesn't it?

[6:20] I don't think that it's an accident that the lectionary lumped these readings together. What do we see from Jesus? Well, in verse 2 we see, He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light.

Now what does that mean? Transfiguration. Transfiguration. It's not a word that we use every day. Well, I'm going to do the cliché reference to Merriam-Webster here for a moment and look for some help.

Transfiguration means a change in form or appearance. So let's ask, why the change in Jesus' appearance? What's going on here?

Isn't it happening because the glory of Jesus, the holiness of Jesus, is being unveiled in that moment before the eyes of the disciples?

They looked at Jesus, and they saw the glory of God and the holiness of God. They saw Moses and Elijah with Him, and even heard the voice of the Father bearing witness to who Jesus is.

[7:33] This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him. They saw Jesus as the Holy Son of His Holy Father, and what was their reaction?

When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. They fell on their faces and were terrified. Wouldn't you be terrified if you were in their place?

To hear the voice of the Father, to see the glory of God as Jesus is shining like the sun, to be reminded that God dwells in light unapproachable, and to be reminded of that by being surrounded by that blinding presence.

The awe and the fear must have been overwhelming. Remember what the prophet Isaiah said when he found himself in the presence of the Lord?

The reaction must have been similar to his. Woe is me, for I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips and dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

[8:44] So Peter, James, and John fall on their faces in fear. And what does Jesus do?

Our narrative takes a turn here, doesn't it? Jesus came and touched them, saying, Rise and have no fear. One moment, Jesus is shining like the sun.

They see Jesus as holy God. They're overwhelmed by his glory, by his holiness. Then what happens? They're approached by the one they know, their master, their teacher, the one who called them individually to follow him, the one who loves them, the one whom they would have been afraid to approach moments before, draws near and touches them, and with love and compassion drives away all their fear.

They see Jesus as holy, as set apart, as shining in glory. But they also encounter Jesus as their beloved friend, one who loves them, one who knows them, one who calms them when they are afraid, one who sees all of their weakness for what it is and responds with compassion.

We could almost say that they saw two visions of Jesus in these few verses. So let me ask you this. Which one was the real Jesus?

[10:23] Both. That's right. Jesus. It's both and. He is by nature fully God and fully man. He is by character fully holy and fully loving.

As I think on this reality, I'm reminded of this excerpt from our catechism. Question. According to Holy Scripture, what is the nature and character of God?

Answer. God is love. Sharing an eternal communion of love between the three persons, God loves and mercifully redeems fallen creation. God is holy.

God is utterly transcendent, good, righteous, and opposed to all sin and evil. God's love is holy.

God's holiness is loving. God is loving.

And the Lord Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of God's whole character. God is love. God is holy. God's love is holy.

[11:23] God's holiness is loving. And the Lord Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of God's whole character. And isn't that what we see in our account of the transfiguration for this morning?

God is loving. We see Jesus shining like the sun, shining because he is righteous, because he is holy, because he is set apart from all sin and evil.

But we also see Jesus reaching out with compassion, telling his disciples not to be afraid. We see the one who is set apart from all sin and evil.

We see him reaching out to sinners and drawing them near. And isn't that amazing? Only when we see the expression of God's love and holiness in Jesus, only then can we come to really understand and appreciate the power and the beauty of the gospel.

Because God is loving, he is merciful and gracious. Because God is holy, he is righteous and he is just. So it brings us to a set of questions.

[12 : 44] How can God be merciful to sinners and just in dealing with sin and disobedience? How can the God who is set apart from all sin and evil forgive sinners?

How can the God who is set apart from all sin and evil show mercy to the guilty? How can a God who is set apart from all sin and evil call sinners into his presence?

And how can we, guilty and sinful, stand in the presence of a holy God? Transfiguration leads us to think about God's character.

And that leads us to think about the gospel. So let's think about the answer to these questions. The answer, brothers and sisters, is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The answer is the gospel. When we chose to disobey God, we acquired a debt that we could never pay because we owe to God, our creator, perfect obedience.

[13 : 53] obedience. But what happened? God, in his mercy, sent his son to pay that debt for us, through his perfect obedience for us, even unto death, so that all who believe should not perish but have everlasting life.

We see justice, and we see mercy, and we see them meet perfectly in the cross of Jesus Christ, and that is our gospel hope.

in the person of Jesus, we see God's love and God's holiness. In the work of Jesus, we see God's justice and God's mercy.

In Jesus, in who he is and in what he has done for us, we see the gospel, and the transfiguration reminds us of who he is. Who he is reminds us of the gospel.

In Christ, we can draw near to a holy God who dwells in unapproachable light, not by what we have done, but by the blood of Jesus.

[15 : 00] Not through our qualifications, but through the qualifications of Jesus. Not through our merits, but through the merits of Jesus. Not through our works, but through the work of Jesus.

Not through our righteousness, but through the righteousness of Jesus. So let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The holiness of God is a fearful thing. We probably think far too little of it.

Most of us do. But, we would be thinking wrongly of the holiness of God if we were to think that it means that we can't draw near.

In Christ, and in Christ alone, we can draw near. In Christ, and in Christ alone, we can draw near because He is holy, because He is righteous, and because He has given His righteousness to us as a free gift by faith.

[16 : 09] What happened at the transfiguration? Peter, James, and John were confronted with the holiness of God when they saw Jesus shining like the sun.

They also saw the love of God when Jesus touched them and drove away their fear. They saw that God's love is holy, God's holiness is loving, and they saw that the Lord Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of God's whole character.

Going into Lent, which is about to kick off this week, I want us to remember that. We are going to be thinking a lot about repentance.

At least, I hope we are. That always drives us to remember. If we think about it rightly, it drives us to remember God's holiness and our unworthiness.

But we cannot let that drive us to despair because we have every reason to rejoice and to hope even in the midst of Lent when we aren't allowed to say Alleluia.

[17 : 23] Get it all out now. We have every reason to rejoice and to hope because the holy and loving Father who has called us to draw near to Him through the precious blood of His Son is in the business of saving the unworthy and that is precisely what He has done in Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.