

A GLIMPSE OF GLORY

Matthew 17:1-9

Good morning!

What a joy it is to be preaching again today! Thank you to Pastor Matt for asking me to step in today. He is away with his family on a trip to California right now but will be back next week.

You know, last year the Lord blessed me with a change in my full-time profession. Many things led up to it, but one of the many blessings I have now is the freedom to listen to background audio of choice while I do my diagnostic work. I can listen to music, audiobooks, audio-bible, and news from a variety of sources.

This transition happened in August of last year and it took a couple of months to really settle into a routine ... and then Hamas invaded Israel on October 7th.

That became for me a major turning point in my life.

I've listened to many first-hand reports, the testimony of first-responders, war reports, and so much more, and I still do – I couldn't have done that at my previous job.

And since that invasion, we've all seen a massive rise in anti-Semitism – of real, active Jew hatred – not just across the globe, but right here in the United States. On college campuses and marches in the streets, we see people screaming "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free". Granted, not all chanting it understand what that means – they're just following the crowd in willful ignorance. But that slogan is a deliberate call for the total annihilation of the Jewish people from the land of Israel – from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea.

It's not my intent to go on a rant about that. I know we all have our perspectives on it.

But then there's the ongoing war over the Ukraine invasion, the empowerment and rise of malign actors in the world: Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Xin Ping in China, Kim Jong-Un in North Korea, and the Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran, just as the obvious examples.

Iran is heading for nuclear weapon capability while the Middle East is on fire.

And so much more...

And Jesus tells us that as the world approaches its end, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom ... you will be hated by all nations because of me ... and the love of most will grow cold." [Matthew 24:6-12]

And when you spend a lot of time listening to increasing evidence of it, watching video of what one human being does to another with demonic delight, words escape me ...

I've literally turned off my audio, my phone, and wept in the privacy of the bathroom.

If it wasn't for knowing Christ, I would despair. I need him like I need oxygen. And so do you.

The text we'll be looking at today, I find to be one of the most incredible portions of Scripture. I don't think there's any way to look at this as anything other than the tip of the iceberg.

During such violent atrocities, real hatred and overwhelming godlessness, Jesus gives us a glimpse of who he really is. And provides the comfort only He can.

Hear now the reading of God's Holy Word from Matthew 17, beginning in verse 1 ...

Matthew 17:1-9

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

⁵While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Word of God. For the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray:

Almighty God, to Whom all hearts are open,
All desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hid.
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
By the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit,
So that we may perfectly love You
And worthily magnify Your Holy Name,
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen

For the sake of context for today's text, I want to revisit just a little from last week...

Last week, we saw that Jesus – for the first time – announced that he was going to enter into his suffering, death and resurrection on the third day. That was *far* from the expectations the

disciples had to that point, so Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Peter was instantly rebuffed with the blunt comments of Jesus, “Get behind me, Satan!”

Wow!

Jesus had alluded to his suffering and death elsewhere in his ministry: for example, in his reference to Jonah and being in the belly of a great fish for 3 days and nights [Matthew 12:40]; and also, in reference to him raising the temple (his body) in 3 days if it was destroyed [John 2:18-22].

But only now, just a few weeks before he was going to his death, Jesus deliberately explained in detail what was about to happen.

He explained specifically and in detail that he was about to “suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” [Matthew 16:21]

This was the first of three explicit times Jesus did this.

The shock and horror among the disciples must have been fierce. They really didn’t understand the big picture, did they? At least not yet. Not until after the resurrection, the ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

After that, they were willing to die for him – and most would die horribly – to complete their own calling in fulfilling the Great Commission.

But right now, they were – figuratively speaking – shell-shocked. Traumatized.

Jesus pushed on, saying:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. For what good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ***For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then will reward each person according to what he has done.***” [Matthew 16:24-27]

Their minds must have been blown. Think about it ...

Ever since they’d been called by Jesus, the disciples had personally witnessed so much! Miracles, healings, exorcising demons from people, seeing Jesus masterfully confront false teachings, people being raised from the dead, a few loaves and fish multiplied to feed thousands of people, blind people being granted vision, Jesus walking on water, calming a storm, and so much more.

And now he's telling them that he must suffer and die, be resurrected, and ascend to heaven and then he will come again in glory during the Second Coming as Judge over the whole earth, rewarding each person according to what he – or she – has done.

Other translations say “repay”, “judge according to”, “give to each according to” ... his deeds. The plain understanding is a person getting what he or she deserves according to what he or she has done. And the one doing so is the Judge. In this case, Jesus – the Son of Man descended in glory in the Second Coming!

The last scriptural record of a Day of Judgment was the end of the Old Testament in Malachi chapters 3 and 4. There he prophesies the Day of Judgment and the great and inevitable “Day of the LORD” with the promise to send Elijah ahead of that dreadful day. Then follows 400 years of total prophetic silence, until John the Baptist arrived.

And now, Jesus tells his disciples explicitly that he is going to die and be raised to life and then come again in glory in the Second Coming as the Judge over the whole world.

It's so hard to put ourselves in the shoes of the disciples, isn't it?

That must have been utterly mind-blowing! Comprehension of its true magnitude wouldn't come until later.

But Jesus appears to give them a week to absorb this, no doubt to talk about it one way or another – seriously, who would be able to keep quiet about it? – but the text is silent for a week. It also doesn't say they traveled anywhere, so there's no reason to assume they did.

...maybe some even went off by themselves somewhere weeping in the bathroom...

In our text for today:

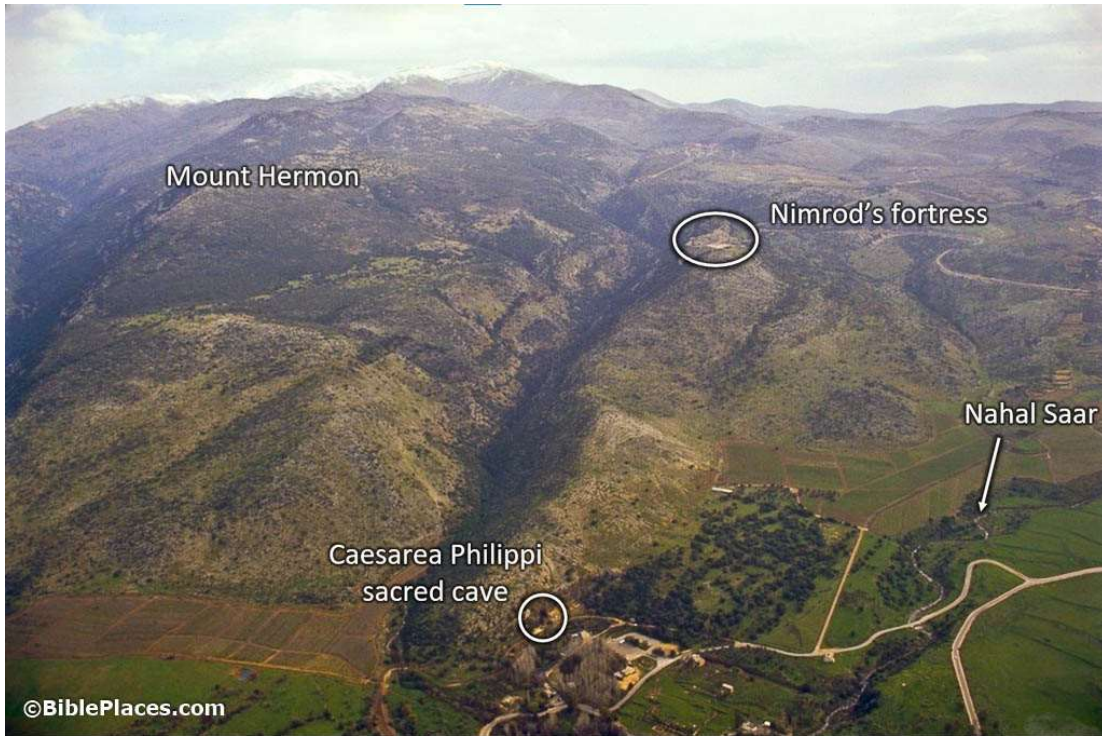
“After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.” [Matthew 17:1]

Peter, James and John – three of his closest disciples – trekked up a high mountain near Caesarea Philippi. The bible doesn't call it by name, just a high mountain. Not a small hill, but a high mountain.

And the closest high mountain to Caesarea Philippi is Mount Hermon. Caesarea Philippi being essentially at the foot of Mount Hermon.

Other locations have been suggested in church history, but it seems perfectly reasonable to me that this is the mountain they climbed and not one dozens of miles away before climbing it.

Actually, Mount Hermon is more of a mountain cluster, the northern point of which is the most northern tip of the country of Israel. And the elevation of the Mount Hermon cluster ranges from 7336 feet to 9232 feet. That's an elevation of 1.4 – 1.75 miles.



C Smith

Photo - Jan 2020

View of Mount Hermon from Caesarea Philippi



Caesarea Philippi is 1150 feet in elevation. Which means Jesus and his disciples would have had to climb well over a mile in elevation in addition to the horizontal distance.

All that to say that a climb of this magnitude would not have been a trivial task; it's plainly not a short trip to the corner store. It took plenty of time to climb it.

And now, emotionally traumatized from Jesus' revelation of his impending death, and no doubt physically exhausted from the climb – in fact Luke tells us they were very sleepy – they are now exposed to the shock of their lives...

Verse 2 ... "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light."

This was the most incredible thing they had ever witnessed.

Transfigured. Transformed.

What *was* Jesus' transformation here?

Quite simply, his deity was coming through. It's his inherent divine glory. The Shekinah glory of God broke through.

I going to borrow an analogy from theologian RC Sproul...

What color is a lemon? It's okay, it's not a trick question. What color is a lemon?

Right – yellow.

Now, what color is a lemon in the dark? When the light is out?

Black!

Why?

Because a lemon is only yellow when light shines on it, right? It absorbs all the colors of the light spectrum except for yellow and reflects that back out for us to see.

Yellow isn't intrinsic to a lemon. It doesn't generate yellow out of its constituent nature, right? It simply reflects the yellow wavelength when light shines on it and absorbs all the others.

But here, Jesus' glory shines out of his inherent nature. It's one of the many proofs in the bible of Jesus' inherent divine nature. He is the source of the light. He isn't reflecting the surrounding light. He's the source of it!

Think of it!

Its magnificence is simply staggering. Stunning!

In the book of Revelation – written by John by the way, the same John who is now in Jesus' transfigured presence – after telling us of the new Jerusalem coming down to the New Earth from heaven, it tells us in Chapter 21:

*"²²I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for **the glory of God gives it light and the Lamb is its lamp.**" [Revelation 21:22-23]*

And who is the Lamb? Jesus.

That's what Peter, James and John are glimpsing here.

It's the same glory that Saul experienced on the road to Damascus while he was on his way to persecute the church.

"As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' [*Interesting, isn't it? He says: "me", not "the church"*]

⁵'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied." [*Acts 9:2-5*]

He knew even as he asked the question that whoever this was, it was the Lord of heaven and earth ... now self-identified as Jesus.

Again, the same Shekinah glory intrinsic to Jesus' divine nature.

Brighter than the noon day sun. Blazing. Intense. Blinding.

This is what Peter, James and John saw as the veil of Jesus' human nature was pulled away to expose Jesus' inherent, divine glory.

Fortunately for them, they were somehow protected from going blind – unlike Saul – and were given the unspeakable privilege of seeing Jesus for who he really is.

And then they see Moses and Elijah. What's that all about? Verse 3:

"Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus."

Matthew doesn't tell us what they were talking about, but Luke does.

³⁰Two men, Moses and Elijah, ³¹appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem."

[*Luke 9:30-31*]

Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about his impending death, his resurrection and ascension – his departure. The time was coming soon. We don't know exactly how soon, but soon enough.

How did they know it was Moses and Elijah? Who knows? The bible doesn't tell us that. But it's perfectly clear they knew exactly who they were.

But more important to the disciples was the fact that Moses and Elijah were bearing witness to the fact that Jesus was the fulfillment of the entire thrust of the Old Testament. Moses represented the Law – so often the Law is referred to as the "Law of Moses", isn't it? – and Elijah represents the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets along with the Psalms all point to Jesus.

Do you remember what happened with the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus after Jesus' resurrection?

They were discussing the recent events when Jesus appeared to them and walked along with them, but they were kept from recognizing him for the moment. Luke 24 beginning verse 25:

“[Jesus] said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ ²⁷**And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself.**”

And then after Jesus made himself known to them and vanished:

³²“They asked each other, ‘**Were not our hearts burning within us** while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’”

Jesus opened up the Old Testament to them about what it says about himself, and their hearts **burned** within them. They were on fire for him.

The Old Testament may be historically and contextually difficult for us to grasp, but Jesus is there. He's throughout the Old Testament. It points to him and the presence of Moses and Elijah here on the mountain is testifying to that truth.

Remember that in the Old Testament – as it says in Deuteronomy 19:15 – a matter must be established or validated by the testimony of two or three witnesses. And here we have Moses and Elijah doing just that.

Peter suggests they put up three shelters or booths. But as Luke tells us, he really didn't know what he was saying.

Kind of like [*finger up and down lips*]...

⁵“While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said. ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am **well** pleased. **Listen to him!**’”
[*Matthew 17:5*]

Instantly, the disciples were face down on the ground, tasting the dirt, terrified.

Who wouldn't be!

It's not every day that God speaks out loud.

He said essentially the same thing when Jesus was baptized, didn't he?

¹⁰“As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” [Mark 1:10-11]

And in the Gospel of John when Jesus was talking with his disciples about his impending death, he prays:

“²⁸Father, glorify your name!’

Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I **have** glorified it, and I **will** glorify it again.’”

[John 12:28]

Jesus told them that the voice was for their benefit, not his. Plainly showing them that this was all part of God’s plan.

And do you remember back in the Old Testament when God delivered the 10 Commandments, He did so verbally to all the people. Several times in Chapters 4 and 5 of Deuteronomy – read it for yourself later – it says “you heard his words from out of the fire”, for example:

Deut 5:22 ... [after delivering the 10 commandments] ... These are the commandments **the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly** there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more.

And here on this mountain, God speaks out of a cloud again to Peter, James and John:

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. **Listen to him!**”

The Father – Who **cannot** lie – testified to who Jesus is.

Scared out of their wits, they now feel Jesus’ tender touch:

“‘Get up,’ he said. ‘Don’t be afraid.’ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.” *[Matthew 17:7-8]*

The transfiguration was over. Their momentary glimpse of Jesus’ divine glory was veiled once again by Jesus’ human nature.

What an incredible, magnificent moment!

Why, though? Do you ever ask yourself, why the transfiguration?

Again, just tip of the iceberg, but there are two very obvious reasons right off the bat.

First of all, they needed it. And their witness was to be an important part of the biblical record.

The disciples, as were the people of the day, were expecting Jesus to throw out the Romans and set up his kingdom on earth now ... for him to be a political Messiah. Suddenly, Jesus tells them of a radically different plan. One that requires his suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and Second Coming in glory.

Jesus just turned their entire world upside down and they are traumatized, deeply saddened contemplating Jesus’ death.

And while they were still digesting this, he took three of them up a mountain and gave them a glimpse of what's behind it – a preview of coming attractions, so to speak.

The behind-the-scenes picture is SO much bigger than what they could have ever imagined.

Regardless of personal traumatic circumstances, they needed to know for certain that God is in **full** control of all things.

Secondly, WE needed it. And for the same reason.

We need to know for certain that God is in full control of all things regardless of personal traumatic circumstances.

We need to see and understand that Jesus Christ has two natures – one human and one divine. And they don't mix. Jesus doesn't have a deified human nature or a humanized divine nature. He took on a human nature for a reason. And the divine nature was and is still there.

As Paul says in Colossians 1, God the Son...

*“¹⁵ ... is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together ... ¹⁹For God was pleased to have **all** his fullness dwell in him” [Colossians 1:15-16,19]*

We see that on this side of the cross, don't we? But before the crucifixion, Jesus didn't want their experience to be used to try to force him into being their political Messiah.

So, he told them explicitly not to tell anyone about it for now:

“⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’” [Matthew 17:9]

They just witnessed the most incredible event of their lives and the urge to tell their friends about it must have been palpable. But Jesus tells them, not now.

The Father had just told them to “Listen to him!” And in obedience, they did.

But they were eyewitnesses. They would one day testify to the world about it. Again, three witnesses testifying to its truthfulness.

John, for example, opens his gospel talking about it:

*“¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ... ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. **We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**” [John 1:1-2,14]*

And Peter boldly proclaims:

“¹⁶We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but **we were eyewitnesses of his majesty**. ¹⁷For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ ¹⁸We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” [2 Peter 1:16-18]

For the sake of time, I’ll pass over the next few verses about Elijah and John the Baptist ... that’s a message all by itself, frankly.

But what I do want to do is spend a few minutes reflecting on the Father’s command for all of us to “Listen to him!” It’s not a suggestion; it’s a direct command to listen with the intention of obedience.

This past week, I deliberately listened to all 4 gospels with that as my focus. Just to listen to Jesus.

On the one hand, it’s a very depressing task. If you want to see yet again just how fallen each one of us is, try it. The thoughts and attitudes of my heart have a long way to go, and I’ll be the first to admit it.

Especially as I listen to and watch what’s going on in the world.

But Jesus tells me – and you:

“I have told you all these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” [John 16:33]

“**Listen to him!**” says the Father.

He’s not telling us to stop listening to other things, necessarily, but perspective matters. Truth matters.

There is evil in the world, real demonic activity in the world. But Jesus on His throne, has overcome the world, and will come again in judgment of the world. Nothing can stop it. Nothing! So, take heart. Fear not. That was the first big thing that grabbed my attention in listening to him.

The second was Jesus repeatedly talking about the seriousness of sin. When he began his ministry, he picked up from John the Baptist calling for people to repent and believe.

Repent of what? Sin.

And that means we don’t get a say in what sin is. Sin is whatever God says it is. Period. We don’t get to redefine it to accommodate our preferred sinfulness.

Which means we're the ones who need to change. We don't get to demand that God change his standards of righteousness to let us keep sinning.

Are we willing to repent?

The author of Hebrews tells us:

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and **the sin that so easily entangles**, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ²**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus**, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. [*Hebrews 12:1-2*]

Each and every one of us has a sin that easily entangles ... And we **know** it.

In the privacy of your own heart, are you willing to repent of it? It's just between you and God. It starts with naming it and confessing it before Him.

²⁸Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." [Matthew 11:28-29]

"Listen to him!" says the Father.

He's saying for those who are weary of fruitless toil because of the burden of sin, he offers us rest for our souls as we release our sin to him and simply walk in faithful obedience to him.

As you will remember, the name "Jesus" means "the LORD saves" and he was given that name because "he will save his people from their sins" [Matthew 1:21]

The third thing that grabbed my attention was Jesus' repeated warnings about the reality of hell.

There are many who deny it today, but just listen to Jesus. He wasn't shy in warning people about it.

When he comes again in glory, he will separate the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff, the righteous from the unrighteous. There's no ambiguity about it; he's crystal clear.

Some will go to hell, the lake of fire, the outer darkness where there is no peace for all of eternity. And some will go to heaven, to be with Jesus forever with permanent peace.

There's no middle ground, no third alternative.

So, the question is, where am I going? Where are you going? We need to be certain. Because Jesus says:

“²¹Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day. ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you; away from me, you evildoers!’” [Matthew 7:21-23]

The key here, obviously, is his final comment: you evildoers, you workers of lawlessness, you who practice iniquity. In other words, those who refuse to repent and cling to their sin.

Obviously, it’s possible to profess to be a Christian, yet inwardly be a wholesale, unrepentant rebel – like Judas the traitor. But Jesus knows those who are truly his – those who possess genuine faith. And those who possess it will necessarily profess it.

So, how do we know the difference?

Well, what do you know – Jesus tells us:

“¹⁶By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.” [Matthew 7:16-20]

What else did he say? So much could be said about Jesus’ words about forgiveness – from the heart – and love for one another. About money. About a whole host of things...

But I’ll just mention one more thing that grabbed my attention this week.

The disciples questioned Jesus about the end times, what the signs of the times would be. Bottom line – are we ready for his return?

“**Listen to him!**” says the Father.

In Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, Jesus tells us not to be deceived, to stand firm in the faith, that suffering for being a Christian is to be expected, that false teachers and false Messiahs will come and that while the day and hour of his return is unknown, it is a surefire guarantee.

Are we ready for him?

Seriously – are we ready for him?

Honestly, my personal answer is yes and no. There’s so much I still want to do here. So much I still want to see. But I know where I’m going. Of that, I have no doubt.

How about you?

Jesus was sinless in his humanity and willingly went to the cross for my sake. On the cross, he took upon himself my personal sin and endured the outpouring of the wrath of Almighty God against that sin. It was so hard to endure, that Jesus cried out “why have you forsaken me?” He really was forsaken at that point – he was in hell in my place. And then it was over because there was no more sin. And so, he declared triumphantly from the cross, “it is finished!”, gave up his spirit and died. On the third day, he rose again. He then ascended into heaven where he now sits at the right hand of God the Father until he will come again in glory to judge the whole world.

By faith, I have received his sinless, perfect righteousness. My righteousness is like a filthy rag. But by faith, I am clothed in his perfect, sinless, righteousness. And so, I now stand justified in the presence of God. By grace alone.

If you have never **really** put your personal trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of all your sins, and the provision of his perfect righteousness, then do it today. Why wait?

As Christians, Christ is in us. The same Christ we were just reminded of again. He is in us!

And He really is coming again in glory!

Are you ready?

Amen.

Let us pray...

Benediction.

Jesus: “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you, not as the world gives, give I unto you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” *[John 14:27]*

Go now, in peace, to love and serve the Lord.