

I recently got married. Right now, we are in the honeymoon phase. We love one another, we wake up together, and we still think we can change each other!

A few years ago, some guys from church and I went hiking in Colorado. Our goal: to summit three 14ers. I'll never forget the time Mike, Clint, Danny and I hiked Little Bear [view the online sermon to see a photo] in the Rockies. This mountain is considered one of the most dangerous of all the 14ers. People die here. Literally, I had to have a helmet in case of falling rock. So, of course I asked, "Can I go?"

I'm starting with this story because, in our passage today, the disciples are on a journey with Jesus that culminates on a mountain, which, in many ways, parallels what it looks like for us to journey with Jesus today. Our goal is to unpack this text and discover what it means for us to journey with Jesus also and see what awaits us on the summit! Let's start with the disciples as they head...

TOWARD THE MOUNTAIN

As Jesus and his disciples work towards their mountain in Matthew 16, they have some work to do first—some preparation, some switchbacks to climb, some ridges to crest.

First, Jesus is hiking with his disciples after a *lovely* interaction with the Pharisees and Sadducees when he says to them: "Be careful...be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6). What does he mean by this? Well, what does yeast do? It helps bread to rise. And all you need is a little bit for the whole loaf to be affected. So, what's Jesus saying? He's saying, "Beware of the teaching, the influence, the ethos of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Even a little bit will affect you!" So, the first obstacle Jesus and the disciples confronted was false teaching.

What was it about the Pharisees and Sadducees that has Jesus call them out like this? Think about the Pharisees: they weren't all bad, right? Did you know they were great at evangelism? Jesus even said they'd cross sea and land to make a single convert. What's wrong with that? Seems pretty aspirational! You know they were meticulous tithers, too, right? They tithed on everything, even little spices! You know they loved their Bibles, don't you? They studied the Scriptures diligently, searching for eternal life. We like Bible study and spiritual disciplines, don't we? And they were known for their prayers and spiritual disciplines—man could they pray! So scriptural, so sound, so deep.

So, what's the issue? The problem wasn't that they evangelized, it's that *when* they did, they evangelized people to their system and not to Christ. The problem wasn't that they tithed, but that *when* they did, they did so while neglecting people in need of help. The problem wasn't that they did Bible study, but that *when* they did, they did it to maintain their moral superiority. The problem wasn't that they prayed and exercised spiritual disciplines, but that *when* they did, they did it to be seen as spiritually awesome.

Let me summarize: the issue was that *their hearts were far from God*. Their external practices were great—they were very pious, very devoted. But their hearts were prideful, hypocritical, and manipulative. What about your heart? Any pride? Any moral superiority above others? Any doing of religious things to be viewed as cool and awesome by others? Don't give in to the yeast of the Pharisees. Rid yourself of this false teaching!

That's obstacle #1 for the disciples. Now, here's hill #2 to climb. As Jesus and his disciples walk along their trail, they come to Caesarea Philippi. It is here that Jesus asks his disciples a question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13), to which they reply, "Some say John the Baptist,

others say Elijah, while still others think you're Jeremiah or one of the prophets!" (Matthew 16:14). But notice what Jesus does. He makes it personal: "'Who do you say that I am?'" (Matthew 16:15). It's Peter who pipes up, saying, "'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'" (Matthew 16:16). And Jesus says, "'Blessed are you, Peter!'" (Matthew 16:17). In other words, Peter gets it right.

So, the disciples had to navigate not only (1) false teaching, but also (2) false perceptions of Jesus.

Here's how this applies: false perceptions of Jesus didn't end in the first century. They exist today, too. Today, people have their Prosperity Jesus, Therapy Jesus, MAGA Jesus, Woke Jesus, Apolitical Jesus. People make Jesus fit into their box. But can I be honest? You can't. Jesus won't be boxed in. So, my advice? Read the gospels, learn, and follow the REAL Jesus.

We've unwrapped two problems so far: (1) false teaching and (2) false perceptions. One more to go.

On their way toward the mountain, Jesus and his disciples get into a conversation. Let me read this to you. "Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matthew 16:21).

This totally baffles the disciples! "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns'" (Matthew 16:22-23). In other words, you've got this so wrong and so upside down, you may as well be playing for the other team!

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (Matthew 16:24-26).

The obstacle here is what I'll call the obstacle of (3) false discipleship. My question for you is whether your discipleship is a true discipleship or a false one? Whereas false discipleship says, "I will follow you as long as it's comfortable, as long as it doesn't cost me too much, as long as it aligns with my plans," true discipleship says, "I'll follow you, Jesus, no matter the discomfort, no matter the cost." Jesus is showing us that the cross precedes the resurrection, that *suffering precedes glory*. If we want to follow him into his kingdom, we must trek the same path.

So, we've seen three obstacles Jesus' disciples must overcome before ascending the mountain with Jesus: (1) false teaching, (2) false perceptions, and (3) false discipleship.

When we first set out toward Little Bear, there were a bunch of obstacles we had to traverse. It was tough! We had to scramble over scree, surmount elevation gain, and overcome thinning air (I'm asthmatic). [View the online sermon to see photos.] We had no ropes, only incline and prayers to God. And the question for us was: *Would we have the resolve to press on? To make it to the top?*

As we follow Jesus with his disciples on the journey toward the mountain, it's the same for us. As we traverse false teaching, false perceptions of Christ, and false discipleship, is it easy? No! But is it worth it? Undoubtedly. How do I know? Well, *because of what's at the top*. Because eventually the disciples transition from going toward the mountain to being...

ON THE MOUNTAIN

For my hike, going from the incline to the summit meant that we went from this [view online sermon to see photo] to this [view online sermon to see photo]. You know what we call that in the hiking world? We call that GLORY. All that effort, all that straining, all that walking for a few brief moments of serene, make-you-feel-like-a-speck-of-dust, mountainous GLORY. Those are the moments you hike for!

As Jesus and his companions keep walking, they ascend their mountain. At a certain point, Jesus takes only Peter, James, and John with him and they, too, behold GLORY.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. [Where's the GLORY? Look...] There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter 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." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. (Matthew 17:1-8)

Now, pause. Some of you are familiar with this scene. Some of you may not be. This is what Christians call the "transfiguration" of Jesus. The word "transfiguration" is the Greek metamorphōō from which we get our English word "metamorphosis." What is implied by that word? *Transformation*, which is what happens to Jesus's appearance!

But what does all this mean? As the text tells us, after six days, Jesus goes up on a mountain. While he is there, his face shines like the sun, his clothes become white like the light, a bright cloud descends on them and a voice (the Lord's) speaks from the cloud, proclaiming Jesus to be His Son. All of this is reminiscent of another biblical mountain, face-shining, voice-from-a-cloud scene. Any guesses? How about Moses?

Back in the Old Testament, Moses went up on a mountain to meet with God. He had seen all kinds of wonderful works (e.g., God's presence in the burning bush, God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, God's provision of water in the desert). But now, Moses is on his mountain (Sinai). While he is there, a cloud covers the mountain. The glory of God settles over Mount Sinai and Moses meets with God. On one of his ascents up the mountain, Moses says, "I want more!" He says, "God, show me your glory!" And God says, "You cannot see my glory full-on! For none can see my face and live!" "But," God says, "Here's what I'll do: I'll cut out a cleft in the rock for you, I'll put you in it, and I'll pass by and you can look at my back!" So, God does and Moses' face is transformed! After this, his face shines with the glory of God. As the moon radiates with the light of the sun bouncing off it, Moses now radiates with divine glory bouncing off him!

See the similarities between this story and ours in Matthew 17? Here, however, is the difference: whereas Moses's face radiated with light because of an external source, Jesus's face radiated with light because of an internal source! Whereas Moses' shining was from without, Jesus's shining was from within. Whereas Moses reflected the glory of God, Jesus reveals the glory of God as, in this moment, his divinity shines through his humanity!

Do you realize what's happening here? Unveiled in this moment is the preincarnate deity of Christ. In this moment, this is a revelation of the divinity of Jesus. Thus, it's a vision of God. What Moses only got a foretaste of on Sinai, now, on this sacred mountain, he, Elijah, Peter, James, John see in full.

Here's the application: if you and I follow Jesus UP the mountain (if we put off false teaching, if we clear our false perceptions of Jesus, and if we say "no" to a false discipleship and truly follow Jesus), this is what awaits you and me ON the mountain! Put differently, what awaits us atop the mountain is the uninhibited glory of God.

This is what our hearts long for, isn't it? To see God? To behold God's glory? Some of you are like, "Eh. Not really." Ok, fine. Don't take my word for it. Think about the experience of Blaise Pascal. He was a math guy and smart theologian who wrote *Pensees*. Pascal, too, encountered the living God. From that experience, he wrote this: "From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God...Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy."

Or consider C.S. Lewis. Here's how he describes encountering God: "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

In Lewis' words, if we aren't interested in beholding God, it's not because He's too mundane for our desires, it's because our desires are too shriveled for Him!

I'll never forget when I stood atop Little Bear. When I looked out and smelled the air, I felt so small and the world felt so big. The view was amazing, the rocks sang God's praises. I would have stayed forever if I could have! And friends, if simply beholding creation gave me such awe, can you imagine how awesome it will be to behold our Creator? We'll never want to leave.

In this life, we see by faith, not by sight. But a day will come when we shall see in full. What does Paul say? "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully" (1 Corinthians 13:12). As R.C. Sproul says, "Heaven itself will be a perpetual Mount of Transfiguration."

What's funny is that Peter, after he beholds the glory of God in Christ, immediately starts building tents. In other words, he wanted to camp out forever in that moment. Proves everything I'm saying!

But Jesus knew that this was but a foretaste, that perpetual glory for you and me wouldn't arrive until his suffering arrived first. The cross precedes the glory, remember? That's where Jesus is headed. So, Jesus and the disciples go from heading TOWARD THE MOUNTAIN to being ON THE MOUNTAIN, to now heading DOWN THE MOUNTAIN (something we'll unpack more next week).

For now, here's how I'll end: if you want to journey with Jesus until you see him face to face, three things are required:

1. You must put off false teaching. (Where is the leaven of the Pharisees in your heart?)
2. You must put off false perceptions of Christ. (Read the gospels!)
3. You must put off false discipleship. (Deny yourself and truly follow Jesus!)

This is the journey of being a Christian in today's world! And by God's grace, in the power of the Spirit, we can do it.