**TRUE IDENTITY**

**(Matthew 17:1-13)**

This past week I attended the Leadership Luncheon at our Cherokee Strip Baptist Associational office here in Enid. The luncheon is attended by mostly pastors and church staff members that serve the churches in our association. This past Tuesday, not everyone knew one another; so, we went around the room, and each person introduced himself. One person identified himself as Les Washnock, the pastor of the Baptist church in Pond Creek. Most people laughed because they knew he wasn’t Les. A couple of more introductions were made, and then a second person falsely claimed to be Les Washnock. Moments later, a third person introduced himself as Les Washnock who actually happened to be Les. It was asked, “Will the real Les Washnock please stand up?”

Do you remember the old TV game show, *To Tell the Truth?* At the beginning of the show, three different people introduced themselves claiming to be the same person. A short description or biography of the person followed, and then celebrity judges would ask questions of each contestant in an effort to determine who was the real person and who the impostors were. The real person was required to answer truthfully while the impostors were allowed to lie so as to conceal the fact that they were not really who they pretended to be. After each judge cast his or her vote, the host would say, “Would the real so-and-so please stand up?”

How well do each of us know who we really are? And how much energy do we expend attempting to convince others or ourselves that we are someone or something we really aren’t?

Coming to grips with our true identity is difficult. Many of us work hard at crafting the image we want to project. We judiciously decide which photos to upload to our Facebook account and which ones to delete from our phone altogether. When we meet face-to-face with someone else, we have to work even harder to keep up appearances. We want to wear the right clothes, say the right words, and convey the right attitude.

Some people’s worst fear is that others will see them for who they really are because they believe that if others really knew them, they would be rejected. Over time, some people have worked so diligently creating their image that they mistake the image they project for their true character.

I am afraid we have done the same with Jesus. The Jesus of the gospels seems a bit wild and scary; so, we have tamed Him. In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew,* Philip Yancey said that he grew up with a Sunday School Jesus, “someone kind and reassuring, with no sharp edges at all—a Mister Rogers before the age of children’s television.” As he grew older, he asked himself, “What government would execute Mr. Rogers or Captain Kangaroo?”

We need a better, fuller, more complete view of who Jesus really is. The funny thing is that the better we know Him, the better we see ourselves for who we really are.

Today, we are going to examine Matthew 17:1-13. In this passage, the disciples saw Jesus in a way they had never seen Him before, and in the process, they got a clearer picture of what they were, too. We are going to look at four things that must happen if we are going to understand the true identity of Jesus and ourselves.

1. **WE MUST BE LED BY JESUS.**

Look at v. 1 of our text. Jesus didn’t just point the way and say, “Go up there, boys.” He went ahead of them, leading them. They could step where He had stepped, and they stopped when He stopped.

By the way, we don’t know which mountain in Israel this was because they text doesn’t tells us. The story is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke but none of them bothered to specify which mountain. Mount Tabor is the traditional site, but others say Mount Hermon because it was much higher and the text does say it was a high mountain. Mount Hermon is the highest point in Israel. The truth, however, is that we don’t really know.

There are other things in life that we won’t know until we follow the Spirit of Jesus who leads us, and Jesus promised that His Spirit of truth would lead us into all truth. It is nice to have a keen intellect, but it is far better to have a keen sensitivity to the leadership of God’s Spirit.

My friend, Ivan Martin, passed away in the spring of 2015. At the time of his death, an article in the Tulsa World claimed that he was a Grand lake icon. He was born and grew up in the Grand Lake area. After making a living as an insurance salesman in Tulsa, he returned to Grand Lake. With the help of his brothers, he built a motel. He and his wife Trudy operated it, and it became a mecca for bass fishermen.

Ivan also served as a fishing guide. He knew the lake like the back of his hand. He knew where the fish were. He knew how to find them and catch them. He even developed a special jib that he used to catch fish with great effect. If Ivan took you out fishing, you were going to catch fish. He was a great fishing guide. Best of all, he was a follower of Jesus.

We use guides in other areas of your life? You have some money to invest. You are unsure about how to do it and where to put your money; so, you contact an investment guide.

Wouldn’t it be great to have a life guide who was you 24/7? You are having an argument with your wife. You want to say, “You’re just like your mother?”, but your guide says, “Let’s not go there. Let’s say this instead.”

It would be great to have guide to show us how to relate to other people—our mates, our children, our boss, our co-workers, our neighbors, etc.

The truth is, we do have a Guide. He is the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised to send. If we will simply ask Him and then pay attention, He will surely lead us.

What decisions are you needing to make? You can trust your wisdom if you wish, but let me ask you, have you ever made a wrong decision? Did you ever make a bad choice, and did that bad choice have bad consequences? Wouldn’t you rather have someone with a far better track record guiding you? Jesus always gets it right. He knows far more about each decision that you do. Not only does He know the fine print, He also knows the hearts and minds of everyone who is involved in this decision and who will be affected by it.

Jesus led His disciples up a mountain knowing that those who were with Him were going to see Him in a new light, knowing that they would come to know Him better than they ever had.

He wants the same for you. Let Him lead you.

1. **WE MUST LOOK AT JESUS.**

Look at v. 2. The word we translate as *transfigured* is the same word from which we get the word *metamorphosis.* When a little worm goes through a metamorphosis, it becomes a beautiful butterfly. Jesus was giving His disciples a glimpse of the beauty and glory that belongs to Him in heaven. When He left heaven, His glory was shrouded in human flesh. That day on the mountain, high up as they were, the beauty of Galilee lay before them, but they weren’t looking out across the landscape. Their eyes were riveted on Jesus who was even more beautiful and more spectacular.

In just a matter of weeks, Jesus would die on a Roman cross. Before that time came, Jesus gave those three disciples a sight which they would remember, and the memory of this sight would erase the ugliness of the cross, but it also put it into perspective.

The theologian NT Wright offers a contrast between what happens in this passage with what happened at the cross:

* Here, on a mountain, is Jesus, revealed in glory; there, on a hill outside Jerusalem, is Jesus, revealed in shame.
* Here His clothes are shining white; there, they have been stripped off, and soldiers have gambled for them.
* Here He is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two of Israel’s greatest heroes, representing the law and the prophets; there, He is flanked by two brigands, representing the level to which Israel had sunk in rebellion against God.
* Here, a bright cloud overshadowed the scene; there, darkness comes upon the land.
* Here Peter blurts out how wonderful it all is; there he is hiding in shame after denying he even knows Jesus.
* Here a voice from God Himself declares that this is His wonderful Son; there, a pagan soldier declares, in surprise, that this really was God’s Son.

What happened on the mountaintop helps us to understand what happened on the hilltop. The significance of the hilltop is magnified by the glory of the One that was unveiled on the mountaintop.

When God shows us His glory, not only do we get a better appreciation of who He is, but we also see ourselves more clearly. Unfortunately, we are not going to like what we see. In Isaiah 6, the prophet has a vision of the Lord sitting upon a throne in the temple. He was high and lifted up. In the vision, the train of the Lord’s robe filled the temple. Isaiah writes in v. 4, “And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of Him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.” This was not smoke that came from wood burning. You have heard the phrase, “Holy smokes.” This was a holy kind of smoke that resulted from God’s presence in the place.

In v. 5, Isaiah reported, “And I said, ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

When you and I see the holiness of God, we can’t help but see our own sinfulness. In Luke 5, Jesus performed a miracle enabling the disciples to haul in a great catch of fish. We read in v. 8, “But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

The closer you get to Jesus, the more clearly you see yourself and your sinfulness.

I have a friend who one winter afternoon painted his clothesline pole. He had a bucket of off-white paint. When he finished painting, he stepped back and thought to himself how nice the pole looked with a fresh coat of paint. That night a storm came in and blanketed his neighborhood with snow. In the morning, he looked out his window and noticed how dingy and dirty that off-white pole looked while it was surrounded by pure, white snow.

Compared to others, you may look pretty good, but when we look at Jesus, we see how dirty and sinful we really are.

Look at Jesus. Let your eyes and your heart be filled with the sight of Him. Don’t look at your neighbors. Don’t look at your fellow church members. Don’t look at your pastor. We will all fail you. Look at Jesus.

1. **WE MUST LISTEN TO JESUS.**

Look at vv. 4-5. King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:7 that there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak. Poor Peter. He didn’t know what time it was. He spoke when he should have been listening. Here is Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. What a perfect time to just sit, pay attention, and take it all in.

Peter, however, can’t contain himself. He says, “I’ve got a great idea. I tell you what. I’ll build three shelters, one for each of you, and we’ll just hang out here awhile.” Peter was bring Jesus down to the level of two humans.

Peter was still speaking when God chose to interrupt him. Are you willing to let God interrupt you? Jesus down to the level of God’s servants Moses and Elijah. God says, “Wait a minute, Peter. This is My Son, and I’m pretty fond of Him, by the way. Listen to Him.”

Our great need is to listen to Jesus. Sometimes, however, we have difficulty discerning the voice of Jesus because of all the other voices that are speaking. It may be the voice of our past, the voice of a parent, the voice of a friend, the voice of a doctor, the voice of a teacher, the voice of an expert, the voice of our culture.

Listen to a story told by Matt Woodley. He is a staff member of a church in Illinois and an editor who works for Christianity Today:

A few summers ago, I watched our 18-year-old son participate in a real X-ball paintball tournament. With sophisticated paintball guns that shoot 13 paintballs per second, the matches are quick and exciting. They’re also chaotic. The X-ball concept depends on five players from each team shooting at their opponents and working their way up a large outdoor field. The goal is to “kill” (that is, hit with a paintball) the other team’s players so you can capture their flag.

But it’s not an easy task. The main problem is that in the midst of thousands of flying paintballs it’s tough to spot your opponents. The other team can crouch and dive behind bunkers and barriers. To make matters even worse, as your team’s coach shouts the right information about your opponents’ locations, the other team’s fans start yelling false information.

When I heard the other fans intentionally confusing my son’s teammates, I was shocked. It sounded like cheating to me—or at least incivility. But after the match my son calmly informed me, “O, yeah, that’s called ‘counter-coaching.’ They’re trying to distract our players with false information. It’s part of the game, Dad. We have to deal with it all the time. It just means that we have to focus on our coach and block out all the other distractions.”

Woodley added:

The Bible clearly warns us that it’s not easy to listen for God’s voice. There will be plenty of “counter coaching” from the culture, the devil, and from our own distracted hearts. As my son said, “That’s part of the game. We have to deal with it all the time.” And there’s only one way to combat spiritual counter-coaching: know the voice of Jesus, hanging on every word as we trust and obey Him—even when the crowd tells us to do something else.

So far, we have seen that we must be led by Jesus. We must look at Jesus. We must listen to Jesus. Finally . . .

1. **WE MUST LEARN FROM JESUS.**

In v. 7, Jesus encouraged His disciples. In v. 9, Jesus commanded them. In vv. 11-12, Jesus instructed them. The disciples asked Jesus a question about Elijah. Jesus explained that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come. In the final verse of our passage, we are told, “Then the disciples understood.”

That is the way it is supposed to work. We are confused. We go to Jesus with our questions. We listen, and Jesus teaches us by His Spirit, so that we will understand.

The disciples, however, didn’t understand everything. The last thing Jesus said in our passage was that just like John was mistreated, He too, would suffer. We have no indication that the disciples caught on to what Jesus was saying. We saw last week that Peter objected when Jesus talked about His coming death. Later in this chapter, Jesus will again tell of His coming death and resurrection. Then, in Matthew 20, Jesus will speak of it a third time.

Often, for us to understand, we have to hear truth again and again. We rarely catch on the first time we hear truth.

Studies show that children ask on average 125 questions per day, but adults ask only 6 questions per day. That means, somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we lost 119 questions. Children learn by being inquisitive. We need to be curious. When it comes to Bible and to life itself, we need to ask questions and then keep asking more questions.

This is one thing I love about my wife. Ruth Ann is curious. She asks me questions, and I, more often than not, don’t know the answers, but it makes me think.

When was the last time you asked Jesus a question? And did you give Him time to answer your question? Like a good teacher, sometimes He will answer your question with a question, but it will make you think, and that is what we need to do. We are to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind. Have you been loving God with your mind?

According to today’s text, we need to love Jesus with our feet by letting Him lead us. We need to love Jesus with our eyes by looking at Him. We need to love Jesus with our ears by listening to Him. And we need to love Jesus with our minds by learning from Him. In the process we will come to know both Him and ourselves better.