

Listen to Him (17:1-13)

Pray. There's one conversation that happens about once a week in the Bateman household. Maybe it happens where you live too. But the conversation goes something like this. My wife, Ana, "reminds" me of something coming up: somebody who's coming over for dinner, or something we have on the calendar, or something we have to get done in the near future. And I'll respond to that with something like "oh—I didn't know about that." And then she'll say "yes, you did. I told you." And I'll say "no you didn't." And if you're married, or are just familiar with human relationships in general, you know how the rest of that conversation goes. She thinks she's right, I think I'm right. And the problem...is that I'm *right*.

No, I'm kidding—I'm usually only right like 99% of the time. But in the 1% of the time that she's right, here's what has usually happened: Ana *did tell* me about whatever it was weeks ago. But as she told me, I was in the middle of something: wrestling with the kids or watching something on TV or let's be honest: probably scrolling on my phone. So when she told me, I *heard* her. I probably even *acknowledged* that I heard her and said something like "okay" or "sounds good" or "yep, that works." **I heard her, but I didn't listen.** I didn't process what she said or consider how what she said impacted my life or my schedule or my calendar—I just said "okay." And so when she brought it up the *second* time, it felt like a new idea to me. I had *heard*, but I didn't *listen*.

And in the passage we're going to look at today, I think **Jesus' disciples are in a very similar place.** They've *heard*, but they haven't *listened*. To catch you up: **in last Sunday's passage, Jesus has just confirmed to them explicitly, for the very first time, that he is indeed the *Messiah*: this long-awaited *king* that the Israelites expected to conquer and set them free from Roman occupation.** But then, he almost immediately *blindsides* them with this added detail about how part of him becoming king is that he is going to be captured, tortured and executed by the authorities. And the disciples *hear* Jesus say that. They're *present* when he says it and he's talking to *them*. But they haven't yet *listened* to it. They haven't truly grappled with what that means for their lives or their priorities or their future roles in God's kingdom. They've *heard* it, but they haven't truly *listened*.

And in today's passage, **Jesus is going to try his best to get them to listen.** So let's see how it goes. If you haven't already, turn with me to **Matthew 17**, and we'll start in **v. 1**:

[1] After six days (that is, since last week's passage) **Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James** (so this is a subset of the twelve disciples), **and led them up a high mountain by themselves.**

So it seems like Jesus is **up to something very strategic** here. He singles out three specific disciples out of the larger group of twelve or more, and takes them privately up on a mountain with him without the others. **He wants these three disciples to see or experience something there on the mountain.** We don't find out *why* he takes *these three men*, but we do know it's *intentional* on Jesus' part. So there they are, the four of them, up on a mountain. And **then this happens**, v. 2:

[2] *There he [Jesus] was **transfigured** before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.* [3] *Just then there appeared before them **Moses and Elijah**, talking with Jesus.*

So **the word transfigured** simply means “to transform in figure or appearance.” Somehow, Jesus' *appearance changed* while they were there. And we don't get any details except that his face “shown like the sun,” and his clothes “became white as light (or lightning).” **So all of this is likely a nod to a passage in Exodus 34, where Moses goes up on a mountain to speak with God, and when he returns, his face is shining.** That nod seems to be *confirmed* in how *Moses* actually *shows up* there on the mountain with Jesus in our story, as well as another well-known Old Testament figure named *Elijah*. Two men who, just to state the obvious, had been very *dead* for quite some time until this moment in the story.

But if you can get past *that*, you're left wondering **about the significance of these two men**. Out of all of the important Old Testament figures who could've miraculously appeared, why Moses and Elijah? And while we're not told *explicitly* why, there are some pretty good guesses out there. *Some* people have suggested that Moses and Elijah represent what Jesus calls “the Law and the Prophets,” the two major divisions of the Old Testament that Jesus says he came to *fulfill*.¹ That seems like a pretty solid guess to me. Others have observed that both Moses *and* Elijah *themselves* had significant encounters with God's presence up on a mountain, just like Jesus and his disciples are about to have. That *also* could be it. I think it could be *either or both* of those things. Or something even cooler none of us have thought of yet. Maybe Jesus will explain it to us one day.

But **what is clear** is that in one way or another, **this is meant to confirm to the disciples watching that Jesus is indeed who he says he is.** As we've already mentioned, the disciples haven't really grappled yet with what Jesus' death meant for this whole “messiah and kingdom” thing. And chances are, they were struggling with

¹ See, for example, Matthew 5:17.

doubts about what that means for Jesus' *identity*. There was almost assuredly some *uncertainty* happening in them about all of it. But this situation on the mountain is a way of Jesus demonstrating to them, essentially, "don't worry—you've got the right guy. I am who I say I am. I am going to do what I say I'm going to do, even if it looks different than you thought it would." It's meant to be a pause-and-reflect type moment, for the disciples to be *strengthened* and *affirmed* in their understanding of who Jesus is.

...but here's the thing: **Peter doesn't get that memo.** He has a very *different* idea of why he and the other disciples are present for all of this. Look with me at v. 4:

[4] 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."

So this is yet **one more episode** in the multi-season Netflix show called "**Peter sure does talk a lot.**" This is just kind of Peter's thing, right? Like, have you ever heard that proverb that goes "better to keep your mouth shut and have everyone *think* you're an idiot, than open your mouth and remove all doubt?" Peter has *never heard* that proverb. And it *shows*. He just *talks, all the time*. He just says stuff. I actually love how the gospels of *Mark* and *Luke* record this event. *They* say that Peter was so frightened and confused by everything happening in front of him, that in this moment, he "didn't know what he was saying." You ever get in a social situation where you're just so nervous and uncomfortable that you start talking to fill the silence? *Random stuff* just starts coming out of your mouth for no reason? That's basically what Peter is doing here.

But more than just running his mouth, what Peter says **indicates he doesn't really grasp what Jesus is trying to communicate** through all of this. He thinks the point is for them to stay up on the mountain and *memorialize* this whole event, when Jesus is actually trying to say something very specific to him and the other two disciples *through* the event. Something he wants them to *listen* to, and *wrestle* with. But **instead of listening, Peter is intent on filling up the silence with talking and doing.**

Which is **why Peter doesn't even get to finish his sentence**, before *this* happens, v. 5:

[5] **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!**"

Peter is still talking, still offering to do things and speak for Jesus when God says, speaking from a cloud in the sky: "this is my Son; and I need you to *listen*." Now *this* part

of the story, too, is **loaded with allusions** to other parts of Scripture. God's presence also resided in a cloud in the story of *Moses* we mentioned earlier.

But it **also echoes an earlier story in *Matthew***. In Matthew 3, at Jesus' *baptism*, right after Jesus comes up out of the water, God the Father speaks from heaven and says, "this is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."² Almost identical to our passage today. But here in Matthew 17, God the Father tags on one additional sentence at the end. What is it?

"Listen to him!"

Listen to Jesus. So **this sentence, at least from my vantage point, seems like the focal point of this entire scene with Jesus, the disciples, and Moses and Elijah.** The point is that God wants the disciples to *listen*. And I don't think it's any coincidence that this instruction comes right in the middle of Peter *talking*. **Michael Wilkins**, one commentator I read on this passage, puts it like this:

*It's as though the Father is saying, "Peter, if you really want to understand who Jesus is and what he has come to do, be quiet, stop trying to figure it out on your own, and listen to what he reveals to you." Throughout the rest of the chapter, and indeed throughout the rest of his ministry, Jesus will lead Peter and the others to a clearer comprehension, and all that is required is that they stop talking long enough to listen to him.*³

That's it. **God wants his people to listen.** And sometimes, in order to *listen*, you have to stop *talking*. You have to stop *doing*. You have to stop taking pride in how much you already *understand*. Sometimes, in order to listen, you have to *sit still long enough to listen*. **In last week's passage**, Peter was so set on speaking *for* Jesus, that he failed to *listen* to him. Jesus said he was going to be crucified and killed, and Peter immediately spoke up and said *what?* "Not if I have anything to say about it! I'll never let something like that happen to you!" **He was too busy speaking for Jesus, to take the time and listen to Jesus.**

Here, in chapter 17, Peter is so busy preparing to *do things for* Jesus, that he fails to *listen to* Jesus. He's ready to build some tents, make himself useful, stay a while there with Jesus and Moses and Elijah. But **he's so intent on doing things for Jesus, that he neglects to listen.** To take in what is happening right in front of him and consider

² Matthew 3:17

³ Wilkins, Michael. *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, p. 605.

what the significance of it all is. And *really*, the reason that he's ready to do things for Jesus, is that he assumes he already *understands* what is happening and why he's there. **He's so confident in his existing understanding of Jesus, that he neglects to listen to Jesus.** But Jesus wants his disciples to *listen*.

Let's keep that in mind as we finish up the passage. For now, keep reading with me in v. 6:

[6] *When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified.*

Now some of our translations conceal it a little here, but that word *heard* in v. 6 is the same as the word *listen* in v. 5. **The disciples, finally, after hearing the audible voice of God from heaven, listen to what is being said about Jesus.** It takes a lot to help them see it, but they finally see it, at least at some level. *Now*, they listen. And **their response** is to fall to the ground, *terrified*. Which, as a side note, is *often* the response in the bible when people have a genuine encounter with God's presence. But, v. 7:

[7] *But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid."* (The point wasn't for them to be *terrified*. The point was for them to *listen*. And since now they're *listening*, v. 8...) [8] *When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.*

So this is **why, earlier, I said** that the point of the story was for them to *listen*. Because **as soon as they're listening, the whole thing appears to be over.** *That* was the point: to get them to *listen*. But on the way down the mountain towards the other disciples, a *conversation* ensues between Jesus and *these* three disciples. *Jesus* starts it, v. 9:

[9] *As 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."*

Now this is **a bit odd, right?** Jesus once again allows his disciples to have a dramatic *revelation* of sorts into who he is, and then once again follows it with a strict instruction not to *tell anybody* else about it. Why shouldn't they tell anybody? It seems like it would go along way if they could say to the other disciples, "hey guys—we just saw Jesus glowing up on a mountain with two resurrected Old Testament figures." Seems like that would help a little with them understanding that Jesus is the Messiah. So why does Jesus want them to keep quiet about it?

The **answer is the same as it's been** all along. If these disciples go about blabbering about this supernatural event, people are probably going to get the wrong idea about

Jesus. They're going to overlook the stuff about Jesus suffering and dying, and focus all their attention on his radiance and glory and power. **But the type of king Jesus is can't be separated from his suffering and death. They go hand in hand.** So Jesus needs the disciples keep quiet about the *glory*, until they have seen his *suffering and death*, and then resurrection. That helps ensure that they're not continuing to misunderstand who he is.

To **put it another way**, before they start talking about what they saw, Jesus wants them **to wrestle with what they saw**. I think Jesus knows that if they immediately start talking about all of this with other people, the noise *resulting* from it may *distract* them from truly wrestling with what it all *meant*. They've just witnessed something *incredible*—Jesus wants them to sit with it for a moment. **He wants them, again, to listen.**

Which they evidently are okay with. But they do have one *question*, v. 10:

[10] *The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”*

So while this question might sound random to *us*, it refers to a prophecy in the Old Testament book of Malachi, that said before the kingdom of God came, the prophet *Elijah* would come and *prepare* people for it all. But that means the disciples are a little confused: the prophecy said that Elijah would come *first*, and *then* the Messiah. But based on what just happened on the mountain, it seemed out-of-order. Jesus had already *come*, and had been with the disciples for a *while*, and only just *now* did *Elijah* show up. They don't know how to make sense of it in this order.

So **Jesus clarifies**—v. 11:

[11] *Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. [12] But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” [13] Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.*

So there were two different ways of *interpreting* that prophecy from Malachi. Some people believed that Elijah would literally, *physically* come back from the dead. Other people believed it meant that *someone like* Elijah would show up. Jesus seems to be

saying that it's the latter.⁴ And that *John the Baptist was* that person. But notice, this isn't just Jesus answering an arbitrary theological question. **Because in the way he answers it, he's still attempting to shepherd his disciples. He still tries to get them to see the connection between him being the Messiah, and him suffering and dying.** He says "in the same way that John the Baptist suffered and died, I too am going to suffer and die." This whole thing is connected. And Jesus wants them, once again, to *hear* that. To understand it. He wants them to *listen*.

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So this whole story, beginning to end, is **about listening** to Jesus. It's about a Father who wants to communicate something to the disciples about who Jesus is and what that means for *them*. About a Messiah who wants to communicate something about who he is and about what is going to happen in the near future. *And* a Messiah who will *continue* to speak about this, over and over again, until his disciples decide to listen to it. **This is a story about a God who speaks and wants his people to listen.**

And at the same time, it's a story about some **disciples who at times, can be a little hard of hearing**. Disciples who sometimes get a little too eager to *do things for* Jesus, or *speak for* Jesus, or take pride in their *understanding of* Jesus—all while neglecting to *listen*. It's a story about disciples that sometimes have a *hard time* listening. But *even then*, it's about a God who, despite all of that, never stops speaking to them.

And really, that's **the story of the entire bible**. The story of the bible is about a God who speaks, wants his people to listen. The whole bible starts with God speaking, and quickly transitions into a man and a woman in the garden who don't *listen*. And the "not listening" continues in their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. Such that God sends the *Law* and *kings* and *judges* and *prophets* through the years to try to get his people to listen.

And there are **some bright spots, but by-and-large**, they don't get the message. *They keep* not listening, but God continues *speaking*. The entire story of the Old Testament is one of God speaking, God's people neglecting to listen, and God continuing to speak to them, sometimes *about* their refusal to listen. And then, finally, one day, **God then sends his son Jesus**. And I want you to look with me at how the author of *Hebrews* describes *that* moment in the story, up on the screen:

In the past, God (what's that next word?) **spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has**

⁴ See also Luke 1:17.

(what?) *spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.*⁵

Even God sending Jesus was a form of speaking to his people. The gospel of John uses the word *logos* to describe Jesus. *Logos* means “word.” As in, a *spoken* word. A *divine utterance* from God himself. So Jesus arrives on the scene. And he speaks, over and over and over again. About the kingdom he comes to deliver. About the types of *people* that belong to it. About the type of king that he is and about how his kingdom will take shape. And he tries, over and over again, to get his people to *listen*. **The story of the bible is about a God who always speaks, and who always wants his people to listen.**

So in light of this passage, and in light of all *that*, **I’ve just got one simple question for us** this morning. No points, no subpoints, no words that rhyme or all start with the same letter. Just one, massively important, life-altering type of question. *Ready?* Here it is:

Are you listening?

God is always speaking—that’s never the issue. The question is: are you listening? And I’ll just reiterate here: when I say “are you listening?” I don’t mean *are you speaking for God?* Speaking on God’s behalf is *great*—it’s just not a good replacement for *listening*. I also don’t mean *are you doing things for God?* *Doing things for God* is great—I hope you are doing things for God—but that’s not the same as *listening*. I also don’t mean *do you currently understand things about God?* I genuinely hope that you *do*—but that’s not the same thing as *listening*. ...I don’t even necessarily mean *are you talking to God about things?* Talking to God *about* things is great—but I think we all know sometimes you can talk to God about all kinds of things and still neglect to listen *to* him. **What I mean is are you listening to what God has to say to you?** *That* is what we’re talking about. *That* is what God wants you to do.

God is not first a crusade to be led: as if what God cared most about was whether or not we do enough things for him. God is not first a theological concept to be mastered. God is not first a cosmic genie who wants us to read out our list of requests to him. God is *first and foremost* a *person*: someone to be *known* and someone who wants to *know us*. If we *miss* that—if we *neglect* that—not a whole lot else matters. And a whole *lot* of that comes down to whether or not you’re willing to *listen* to him.

⁵ Hebrews 1:1-2

And I **can't think of a more needed reminder** in our day and age. **Our world is set up in such a way to all-but-guarantee that we drown out the voice of God.** From the moment we wake up, our devices are *screaming* at us to listen to *them*. Notifications, updates about things we missed while we were sleeping that we desperately need to get caught up on. This constantly-updated, constantly refreshable stream of information and voices and influences that can crowd out every whisper of God that would otherwise get through to us.

But **behind all of that**, if we have ears to hear him, is a God who desires to speak to us. Maybe he wants to speak to you about who he *is*—much like he was doing with the disciples: about the type of king he is and the type of kingdom he has come to bring. Maybe he wants to speak to you about his *affections* for you: maybe you've gotten some things mixed up lately about how God relates to you and he wants to help clear that up. Maybe he wants to speak to you about something he wants you to *do*: something for others or for his kingdom or for your own soul. Maybe it's about something he wants you to *stop* doing: a pattern of sinful behavior that is harmful to you and/or others in your life.

There are **enough people in this room** that I can't even *pretend* to know what he wants to speak to each of us *about*. But **I do know one thing for sure, and that's that he wants each of us to listen. There are few things more important in the world than learning to listen to God.** And in my experience, we often allow a whole lot of things *prevent* us from doing that. I've grown more and more aware of this **in myself** recently. My job—what I do up here on Sundays—is a really precarious thing sometimes. It's an incredible responsibility to have: standing up and teaching the Scriptures, doing my best to help us all see how what's in the Scriptures intersects and shapes our lives as followers of Jesus. It's an *incredible* thing to get to do.

But it can **also become a really dangerous thing**. Because most weeks, I kinda need to have something to say. I joke with our staff sometimes that it's like if you had a class presentation due every week, and you had to give it whether you are ready to or not. It's a rolling deadline every Sunday. And because of that, **it's really easy for me personally to be so concerned with having something of value to say to you guys up here, that I can neglect to listen well to God myself.** I can get so focused on *speaking* that I don't spend enough time *listening*. And doing that, over time, can be a recipe for burnout or something worse.

And **that's a mistake I want to avoid** making if I can help it at all. So our pastoral staff talked about all this, and after Easter this year, they're giving me an extended amount of time off from teaching up here on Sundays. Which I'm incredibly grateful for. **Because my goal during that time is going to be largely what we're talking about *this***

morning: to listen. To sit with God and ask him what he *wants* to say to me. To remove the rolling Sunday deadline pressure for a bit and just allow God to speak. To not be so concerned with doing things *for* God, or speaking *for* God, that I neglect to hear *from* God. **Because there are few things in the world more important than listening to God.**

So here's **what I thought we'd do** for the rest of our time this morning. Rather than me spending any more time *convincing* you that you *should* listen, I thought we'd just spend the rest of our time *actually listening*. So I'm gonna ask the band to come back up. If you've got your bibles or journals or devices out, why don't you go ahead and put those away, somewhere out of sight. Just remove any distractions you can, and we're gonna spend some time simply *listening*. We'll bring the lights down in the room, and Tirzah will play a bit to cut out distractions, and we'll just *listen*. As we do this, feel free to bow your head, close your eyes, maybe open up your hands on your lap to embody a posture of listening. If you've got the space, you could even get down on your knees in a posture of humility—whatever helps you get in the right headspace.

But we'll just ask the Father **a few simple questions**, and then we'll just sit and listen to what he might say. Sound good? Okay, here's the first one:

What do you want to say?

First, I just want you to ask the Father what he has to say to you. Could be any number of different things, but I want you to just ask him what he wants to say. No agenda. No categories. Just ask him what he wants to say, and then *listen*. Take a moment and do that now.

[...]

Second question...

Where have I not been listening?

Remember: God is always *speaking*—sometimes we're just hard of hearing. So ask him where—what part of your life, what part of your world—you haven't been listening well. Ask him what that is, and then *listen*.

[...]

And lastly...

What is *preventing* me from listening?

This could be a pattern of sin in your life. It could be certain devices, apps on your devices that you fill up all of your spare time with. It could be a *pace of life* you're running at that all but blocks out what God has to say. It could be a relationship, a misplaced priority, a preoccupation with selfish pursuits or desires. All sorts of things can get in the way of listening. Ask God if there's anything specific that you need to do something about. Let's do that now...

[...]

Pray to close.