

The Transfigured Christ and His Church

Matthew 17-18 · A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Matthew

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover the Transfiguration as a new Sinai, with the group finding the Exodus parallels themselves, and hear the Father's command that fulfills Deuteronomy's ancient promise of a prophet like Moses: listen to him. Then they enter the fourth great discourse, where Jesus teaches his Church how to live as a family: greatness as littleness, war on scandal, the shepherd's math, a real process for sin in the community that ends at "tell it to the church," and forgiveness without a counter.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church as a visible community with real authority to bind and loose, the promise of Christ's presence where two or three gather in his name, and forgiveness as the family resemblance of the forgiven.

What You Need to Know

The Transfiguration (17:1-8) is built out of Sinai materials, and tonight the group excavates them: after six days (Exodus 24:16, the cloud covered Sinai six days), a high mountain, a select company taken up, a face shining like the sun (Exodus 34:29, Moses' face shone from speaking with God), a bright cloud of glory, and a voice from the cloud. Moses and Elijah appear, the two men of the Old Testament who met God on that mountain, standing for the Law and the Prophets, everything Jesus said he came to fulfil. The differences preach louder than the parallels: Moses' face shone with reflected light; Jesus' face is the source, his garments white as light itself. And the voice repeats the Jordan declaration, this is my beloved Son, then adds a command that first-century ears would catch instantly: "listen to him." Deuteronomy 18:15 promised a prophet like Moses, and commanded of him exactly those words: him you shall heed. The New Moses thread the group resolved on the mountain of the Beatitudes is here ratified by the Father's own voice.

St. Leo the Great identifies the Transfiguration's purpose precisely: coming six days after the first passion prediction and Peter's disastrous rebuke, it removes the scandal of the cross in advance, showing the three future witnesses of Gethsemane the glory that the crucified One possesses by right. The descent from the mountain returns immediately to that hard road: the disciples' failed exorcism, the second passion prediction, and their distress.

The temple tax scene (17:24-27) is small and strange and worth one good question. The collectors ask Peter, not Jesus, whether his teacher pays the tax, another quiet marker of Peter's spokesman role. Jesus' argument is that kings' sons do not pay the king's tax, so the Son of the Father whose house the temple is owes nothing; he pays anyway, not to give offense. And the coin from the fish's mouth is a shekel, precisely enough "for me and for yourself": the Lord folds Peter in with himself, two freemen paying together.

Chapter 18 is the fourth discourse, the Church's family rule. It opens with the disciples' worst recurring question, who is the greatest, answered by a child stood in the middle: unless you turn and become like children, entrance itself is in question, and greatness is humility. Then the ferocity about scandal, millstones and cut-off hands, language whose violence measures how seriously heaven takes the corruption of little ones. The lost sheep gives the Father's math: the ninety-nine left on the hills, the one sought, and "it is not the will of my Father that one of these little ones should perish."

Verses 15-20 are the discourse's doctrinal center and tonight's steelman ground. Jesus lays out a real, ordered process for sin inside the community: private correction, then two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15's standard), then "tell it to the church", *ekklesia*, and the unrepentant who refuse even the church are to be treated as "a Gentile and a tax collector," which is excommunication in seed form, medicine aimed at repentance. Two things follow that demand attention. First, the process assumes the church is findable, visible, and final: the instruction requires a community you can locate and address, and within the process there is no appeal beyond her. Second, Jesus repeats to the apostles as a body the binding-and-loosing formula spoken to Peter: whatever you (plural) bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. Tonight's steelman lives in the relation between those two texts. Then the pearl of 18:20: where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Let the group hear the Emmanuel bell ring; a rabbi's saying held that where two sit with the words of Torah between them, the divine presence rests, and Jesus places himself, personally, in that seat.

The discourse closes with Peter's generous-sounding question, forgive seven times?, exploded by the answer, seventy times seven, and the parable of the unforgiving servant: a debt of ten thousand talents, an unpayable national-treasury sum, forgiven outright, and a hundred denarii choked out of a fellow servant. The arithmetic is the argument, and the ending is the Sermon's petition ("as we forgive") in narrative form, with a warning Jesus does not soften: from your heart.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Exodus 24:15-18. Six days of cloud on Sinai, then the voice: the Transfiguration's blueprint, discovered live tonight.
- Exodus 34:29-35. Moses' shining face, reflected glory beside the Son's native light.
- **Deuteronomy 18:15.** The prophet like Moses: him you shall heed. The Father's "listen to him" quotes the promise back.
- **Deuteronomy 19:15.** Two or three witnesses: the evidentiary standard Jesus builds into his Church's process.
- Ezekiel 34:11-16. The Lord himself will seek the lost sheep: the shepherd's math of Matthew 18 has the Father's own signature.

Voices of the Church

Voices of the Church: St. Leo the Great (Sermon on the Transfiguration)

Leo preaches that the great purpose of the Transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of the disciples: the brightness of the kingdom was shown in advance so that when the Lord hung in apparent defeat, the chosen witnesses would know that glory, not ruin, was being accomplished. The whole body of Christ may take heart: what shone in the Head is promised to the

members.

Voices of the Church: St. Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to the Smyrnaeans)

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, remembered in early tradition as a disciple of the apostle John, writing on his way to martyrdom in the opening years of the second century, already assumes what tonight's Gospel implies: the Church is visible, gathered, and ordered. Where the bishop appears, there let the people be, he writes, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church, the first surviving use of that name. A church you can tell things to is a church you can find.

Voices of the Church: St. John Chrysostom (Homilies on Matthew)

On the unforgiving servant, Chrysostom presses the arithmetic: nothing we forgive one another can be compared to what God has forgiven us, a hundred coins against ten thousand talents. The servant's sin was not remembering his own debt wrongly but forgetting it entirely the moment he was free; mercy received and not passed on curdles into a worse debt than the first.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 554-556. The Transfiguration gives a foretaste of the kingdom and of the resurrection: for a moment Jesus shows the divine glory, confirming Peter's confession, and reveals that he must go by way of the cross to enter it.
- CCC 1443-1445. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God: the words bind and loose mean that whoever is excluded or received back into the community is excluded or received by God; the apostles' authority in Matthew 18:18 continues in the Church's ministry of forgiveness.
- **CCC 881.** The binding and loosing given to Peter alone in Matthew 16 was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head: a college with a head, never a headless college and never a head without the body.
- **CCC 2843.** Forgiveness "from the heart": it is not in our power not to feel an offense, but the heart that offers its hurt to the Spirit finds memory transformed into intercession.

Thread Watch

- **Emmanuel thread (major beat).** "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Let someone in the group connect it to 1:23 if they can; affirm it warmly and say the thread has one more note to sound. Do not resolve it fully.
- **New Moses thread (ratify).** Deuteronomy 18:15 discovered live: the Father's own voice certifies the pattern the group resolved in Session 3.
- **Peter thread (develop).** The collectors approach Peter; the coin pays "for me and for yourself." Small confirmations, no lecture needed.
- **Doing-the-word thread (develop, quietly).** Forgiveness "from your heart" is the Sermon's petition come back with teeth. The judgment scene of Session 12 is drawing closer.

Session Goals

1. Participants excavate the Sinai parallels of the Transfiguration themselves and hear Deuteronomy 18:15 inside the Father's command.
2. Participants can explain the four-step process of Matthew 18:15-17 and why it requires a visible church with final authority.
3. Participants hear the strongest Protestant argument that Matthew 18:18 flattens Peter's role, and can answer it from the texts.
4. Participants receive 18:20 as a real promise of presence and connect it to the study's master thread.
5. Participants run the arithmetic of the unforgiving servant on one live grudge of their own.

Timing for 90 Minutes

Win 15 min · Build 55 min · Send and Live It 12 min · Prayer 8 min. If running long, the pre-chosen cuts are, in order: drop the temple tax question and mention its Peter detail in one sentence (saves about 6 minutes), then drop the Dig Deeper on the rabbinic presence saying (saves about 3 minutes). Do not cut the Sinai excavation, the 18:15-17 sequence, or the steelman chain.

EMMANUEL · SESSION 9 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Transfigured Christ and His Church

Matthew 17-18 · 90 Minutes

Opening Prayer

Father, on the holy mountain you opened heaven for a moment and told us everything: this is my beloved Son; listen to him. Give us tonight the grace to listen, to him and to one another. Gather us in his name and keep his promise among us, for where two or three are gathered, he is in the midst. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Describe a moment, a view, a piece of music, a face, when something ordinary suddenly looked lit from inside. What did it do to you?
2. Growing up, how did your family handle it when someone wronged someone? Straight talk, silence, referees?

Build (55 minutes)

The Mountain of Light

1. **Read Matthew 17:1-8. Live discovery: this scene is built from older materials. Split into two groups: one reads Exodus 24:15-18, the other Exodus 34:29-35. Each group reports every parallel it can find with the Transfiguration, and then name the differences, because the differences are the point. Why these two visitors, Moses and Elijah?**

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Parallels: after six days, a mountain, a select company, a cloud of glory, a voice from the cloud, a shining face. Differences: Moses' face shone with borrowed light from speaking with God; Jesus' face shines like the sun from within, his garments white as light, because he is not near the glory, he is its source. Moses and Elijah are the Law and the Prophets, the two men who met God on Sinai, now standing on a mountain talking with the One who came to fulfil everything they wrote. Sinai has come back, and this time the glory has a human face.

2. **Live discovery.** The Father's voice repeats the Jordan blessing and adds three words: "listen to him." Have someone find Deuteronomy 18:15 and read it aloud. What did Moses promise, what did he command about that promised one, and what has the Father just done?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Moses promised that God would raise up a prophet like me from among your brethren, and commanded: him you shall heed. The Father's "listen to him" quotes Moses' command back over Jesus: the prophet like Moses has come, certified by the voice from the cloud with Moses himself standing witness. The New Moses pattern we watched resolve on the mountain of the Beatitudes is here ratified from heaven. And notice what the disciples see when the cloud lifts: no one but Jesus

only. The Law and the Prophets have said their piece; from now on, listen to him.

Dig Deeper: Why Now?

St. Leo the Great answers: six days earlier Jesus had announced the cross and Peter had rebuked him. The Transfiguration was given to remove the scandal of the cross in advance, so that the three who would later watch him sweat blood in Gethsemane would know that the crucified One goes to the cross owning this glory, not losing it.

3. Read Matthew 17:24-27, one of the Gospel's strangest small scenes. Whom do the collectors approach with their question, and what does that continue? What is Jesus' argument about kings' sons, and why does he pay anyway? And look closely at the coin: whom does it cover?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

They approach Peter, the group's recognized spokesman, as people have since Caesarea Philippi. Jesus' argument: earthly kings tax others, not their own sons, so the Son of the Father whose house the temple is owes nothing there. He pays anyway, not to give offense, freedom exercised as deference. And the shekel from the fish is exactly the tax for two: "give it to them for me and for yourself." The Lord folds Peter in with himself, two free sons paying together, one more quiet stroke in Matthew's portrait of this man's strange nearness to Jesus.

The Family Rule of the Kingdom

4. Read Matthew 18:1-6 and 18:10-14. What question opens the discourse, and what does Jesus put in the middle of the room as his answer? What is the shepherd's math in the parable, and what is the Father's stated will about little ones?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

The disciples ask who is greatest, and Jesus answers by standing a child among them: unless you turn and become like children, greatness is not the issue, entrance is. Greatness in this kingdom is humility, and heaven's ferocity about scandal, where Jesus calls a millstone and the depths of the sea the better fate, measures how seriously the Father takes the little ones, whose angels behold his face. The shepherd leaves ninety-nine to seek the one, and the discourse states the Father's will without qualification: it is not his will that one of these little ones should perish. Ezekiel promised the Lord himself would come shepherding like this; here he is.

5. Read Matthew 18:15-20 slowly; this is the discourse's engine room. Lay out the four steps of the process for a brother's sin. What Old Testament standard is step two built on (see Deuteronomy 19:15)? At step three, what must be true about "the church" for the instruction "tell it to the church" to be followable? And what does verse 18 give to the apostles as a body?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Step one: go to him alone; the goal is gaining your brother, not winning a case. Step two: two or three witnesses, Deuteronomy's evidentiary standard, the matter is still being handled with justice, not gossip. Step three: tell it to the church, which means the church must be findable, visible, and identifiable; the command assumes a concrete community whose judgment can be heard and obeyed. Most Protestant traditions agree and practice real discipline in visible congregations; the live dispute, taken up below, is whether that visible authority has a universal head. Step four: the one who refuses even the church is treated as a Gentile and a tax collector, excommunication in seed, and remember from this same Gospel how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors: as mission territory, medicine ordered toward return. Verse 18 then hands the apostles as a body the binding-and-loosing formula: real authority, ratified in heaven, exercised on earth.

Build Then Press: Does Matthew 18 Cancel Matthew 16?

The Strongest Protestant Reading, Given at Full Strength

Here is a serious Protestant argument, and it engages the texts closely. Whatever binding and loosing meant when spoken to Peter in Matthew 16:19, the identical formula is spoken to the disciples collectively in 18:18. Therefore, the argument runs, Peter received nothing the others did not: the authority is the community's, and Rome has built a papacy on a grammatical accident of who happened to answer first at Caesarea Philippi. Some add 18:1 as evidence: if Peter had just been made supreme, why are the disciples still asking who is the greatest? On this reading the two chapters together teach a fellowship of equals holding shared authority, with no chair, no primacy, no pope. The argument does not depend on an invisible church; most of its proponents affirm visible congregations exercising real discipline, which makes the case stronger, not weaker. This argument is textual, not anti-Catholic spite, and it deserves its full weight.

6. Now press by putting the two texts side by side and listing exactly what each contains. What is in Matthew 16:17-19 that is absent from 18:18? Count the items. And does shared authority in 18 actually subtract anything from 16?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Put them in parallel and the asymmetry is immediate. Matthew 16 contains, addressed to Simon alone and in the singular: a beatitude naming him personally, a revelation from the Father, a new name, the rock declaration, the promise against the gates of Hades, and the keys of the kingdom, the Isaiah 22 steward's office. Matthew 18 contains one item: binding and loosing, in the plural. The shared formula is really shared, and the Catholic Church teaches exactly that (CCC 881): the authority to bind and loose belongs to the apostolic college. But the keys are never repeated, the rock is never repeated, the new name is never repeated. What Peter shares with the college is real; what he holds alone remains alone.

So the two chapters together teach neither a headless college nor a head without a body, but what the Church has always practiced: a college with a head. The steward of Isaiah 22 was one officer within a royal household full of officials; his key did not abolish their offices, and their offices did not duplicate his key. As for 18:1, the disciples asking who is greatest after Caesarea Philippi proves only what the Gospels show on every page: the apostles were slow students, still jockeying on the

road to the cross, which is precisely why the office was given by gift rather than earned by merit. The concession stands and should be made warmly: 18:18 really does mean the Church's authority is never one man's private possession. Catholic teaching does not merely survive that point; it asserts it.

Where Two or Three

7. Read Matthew 18:19-20, then 18:21-35. First, verse 20: what exactly does Jesus promise, and what does a promise like that require of the one making it? Then the parable: work out the arithmetic of the two debts, and name the exact moment the first servant's story turns. What does the last verse demand, and where have we prayed those terms before?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Verse 20 promises presence: where two or three gather in his name, there am I in the midst of them. A rabbi could say the divine presence rests where men sit over the words of Torah; Jesus says I am there, a promise no one can keep who is not God, and a bell our study has heard ringing since a name in chapter 1. Let it ring; it has one more note to sound before we finish.

The parable: ten thousand talents is an unpayable, national-treasury absurdity, and it is cancelled outright on a plea for patience. A hundred denarii is real money, about a hundred days' wages, and utterly trivial beside it. The story turns the moment the forgiven man walks out the door and finds someone who owes him: mercy received was never allowed to become mercy given. The demand of the last verse is forgiveness from your heart, and we have prayed these exact terms since Session 4: forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. The parable is that petition with a plot.

Send (12 minutes)

1. Jesus' process starts with "go to him alone." Whose sin against you have you told everyone except him? What would step one cost you, and what might it gain?
2. Run the arithmetic honestly: what has God written off for you, and what hundred denarii are you still holding in collections? What would releasing it from the heart require this week?

Live It This Week

- Name your ten thousand talents in prayer once this week: say out loud what God has actually forgiven you.
- Take one step of Matthew 18:15: one direct, private, gentle conversation you have been outsourcing to resentment.
- Before your group or family gathers this week, pray verse 20 and mean it: Lord, be in the midst of us.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, transfigured on the mountain, the Father told us to listen to you, and tonight you spoke of little ones, lost sheep, hard conversations, and debts we must release. We are gathered in your name;

keep your promise and stand in the midst of us. Make our parish a place the lost are sought and the forgiven forgive, and lead us down the mountain ready for the road ahead. Amen.

Scripture Memory

Matthew 18:20 (RSV2CE): *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”*

EMMANUEL · SESSION 9 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every Passage in Order of Use

The Transfigured Christ and His Church · Matthew 17-18

Primary Text

• Matthew 17:1-8 · Matthew 17:24-27 · Matthew 18:1-6 · Matthew 18:10-14 · Matthew 18:15-20 · Matthew 18:21-35

Live Discovery Passages

• Exodus 24:15-18 and Exodus 34:29-35 (Sinai excavation, two groups) · Deuteronomy 18:15 (listen to him)

Background Passages

• Deuteronomy 19:15 (two or three witnesses) · Ezekiel 34:11-16 (the Lord shepherds) · Matthew 6:12 (as we forgive) · Matthew 16:17-19 side by side with 18:18 (for the steelman)

Catechism

• CCC 554-556 · CCC 1443-1445 · CCC 881 · CCC 2843

Memory Verse

• Matthew 18:20