

Sin Persists but Grace Prevails! (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. ⁴⁰ And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹ Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” ⁴² While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astonished at the majesty of God.

But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, ⁴⁴ “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.” ⁴⁵ But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side ⁴⁸ and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.”

⁴⁹ John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.” ⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. ⁵³ But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ And they went on to another village. (Luke 9:37–56)

With a Yo-Yo on the Stairs

A. I mentioned last week that, when we come to Christ, sometimes we’re prone to think that everything in our life will go smoothly from that point on. We’ve repented, we’ve come back to God in faith . . . of course He’s now going to fix all our problems. No more relational strife, no more financial woes, no more leaky faucet, no more creaky back.

1. But, what we discovered is that, while the end for us is glory, the road there is marked with suffering and hardship.

B. Well, in a similar vein, when we come to Christ, I think sometimes the expectation is that we’ll be done with sin—that if we struggled with addiction, we won’t anymore; if we struggled with lust, we won’t anymore; if we were selfish and arrogant before, well, with just a snap of God’s finger, we’ll be humble, self-sacrificing, servants.

1. But, while certainly there is massive transformation, transference from death to life, born again in Christ; and while certainly the end for us, again, is glory, full conformity to the image of Christ; what we come to find is that, sadly, there's still an awful lot of sin in us that God is, little by little, rooting out along the way.
- C. If we ever thought there was some sort of elevator to glory, like you just get in and go straight up, this text will do away with that notion real fast. It's more like a winding staircase or something, with the tread boards missing here and there.
1. One of my professors at Westminster said sanctification—or the process of growing in holiness—is like a man going up the stairs while playing with a yo-yo. It's up and down and up and down, but, by God's grace it is still ascending. It will reach the final destination!

Laugh, Cry, Rejoice!

- A. Remember, Jesus has been walking with these guys for quite some time now. And, honestly, we would expect they would be further along than they are.
1. We just left the scene where at least three of them—Peter, John, and James—were given vision of Christ in all His glory, and we think it's only up from here.
 2. But then the narrative that immediately follows here proceeds with a bump and a skid and a scrape . . . and a face-palm. In spite of Christ's training, His example, His instruction, His empowering—these guys still don't get it.
- B. And we want to laugh at them, but we ought to cry. Because it's telling us something about ourselves here as well. Sin is more stubborn than we realize. Even new hearts regenerated by grace struggle to break free from the entangling remnants of the old nature.
1. So we want to laugh, but we ought to cry. But in the end, listen to me, we can rejoice. Because Jesus doesn't leave these guys behind. Grace prevails. And it will prevail for you!
- C. Our text comes to us in the form of five vignettes. Not one is in any way flattering with regard to the disciples. Each gives us a different perspective on the persistence of sin in the human heart. But, in the end, it's the grace of Christ that prevails.
1. This week we'll look at the first three vignettes and we'll pick up the last two next time.

Sin Persists

Vignette #1: Independence (vv. 37-43a)

But They Could Not

- A. The perspective we get on our sin here I would identify with the word "Independence". There is something in us that trends towards this lie that we can live somehow independently of the God who made and sustains us.

- B. So Jesus, Peter, John, and James have now come back down from the Mount of Transfiguration and they find themselves thrust straightaway into the valley of demons.
- C. Now, we've already seen Jesus dealing with demons numerous times already in Luke's gospel. So we're not going to address all the ins and outs of this scene. But there is something new brought to the table here, and I think this really is the point.
 - 1. If you noticed, the accent in this demonic encounter is not so much on Jesus' triumph as much as it is on His disciples' failure—their inability to do so. It's this idea that's brought out there in v. 40 at the end of this father's plea: "I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not."
 - a. Jesus has been training these guys, equipping these guys, we even read back up in Luke 9:1 that He "gave them power and authority over all demons" . . . and yet here again we read: "but they could not."

Prayer and Fasting

- A. Now why do I say that the issue here is independence (or self-reliance)?
 - 1. Well, certainly it is hinted at when Jesus calls them "faithless" there in v. 41—meaning they have left God and gone looking elsewhere for resources to deal with this dilemma.
 - 2. But, beyond this, when we consider what Mark records in his version of this story, it becomes plain. You see Jesus comes out at the end when the disciples ask Him: "Why could we not cast it out?" (Mark 9:28b)—and He says: "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer [and the great majority of manuscripts include here: 'and fasting']" (v. 29).
 - a. In other words: "You weren't relying on God for this, but on yourselves—your experience, your knowledge, your strength. And, therefore, you got nowhere with it. You forgot this war is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of darkness. You don't have the resources to fight in that kind of war!"
- B. The image that came to my mind for some reason is that scene at the end of that movie, The Last Samurai. Do you remember? Where the Samurai are still insistent on fighting with their swords like their ancestors, but in the time since, their enemies have invented guns. And so they show up with knives to a gun fight. And they just get mowed over. And it's tragic.
 - 1. But it's what we do, when we attempt to do ministry and this Christian life thing in our own strength, drawing from our own resources.
- C. And one of the ways you can test whether you are, in fact, doing this "Independence" thing or not is to simply ask: Am I praying? Am I fasting?
 - 1. Prayer and fasting really are just two sides of the same coin—two ways of encouraging the same basic idea.
 - a. Prayer is a way of turning outward and upward to God.

- b. Fasting really just accentuates this movement as it actually is intended to drain myself of strength as a way of saying: “I have nothing to offer here, I need you or there’s no hope!”
- D. So are you praying? Be honest. When things are coming down at work or at home, when things get hard, do you scramble and rely on your own resources, or do you turn outward and upward? Are you praying as you’re going? Are you turning your inner monologue into dialogue between you and the God who can help? Or do you go radio-silent and just get lost up in your head?
 - 1. Where we run in those moments is where we think help will be found. So are we running to ourselves or to God?
- E. Are you fasting? It’s horribly ironic, but when I stop and think about it, do you want to know one of the reasons why I often neglect to fast? I tell myself that I have so much work to do this week and I’ll really need my strength for this or that. A grumbly tummy or a headache from insufficient nutrition would really put me at a disadvantage. So I wait to fast until I have nothing going on, when my strength isn’t really needed.
 - 1. But don’t you see? I’m totally missing the point! It was when these disciples were in the heat of demonic combat that Jesus says: “You should’ve been fasting! My strength is made perfect not in your strength but in your weakness!”
- F. So Christ is here this morning and He is wanting to move us, in whatever we’re facing, from independence to greater faith and dependence on Him.

Vignette #2: Deafness (vv. 43b-45)

Let These Words Sink in

- A. The perspective we get on our sin here I would identify with the word “Deafness”.
- B. So Jesus does what His disciples couldn’t do. With a word of rebuke He casts out the demon from this boy and reunites him with his father. And everyone’s marveling. But then Jesus turns to His disciples and says: “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men” (v. 44).
 - 1. He’s speaking, of course, of the cross. And The image is staggering when we really think about it. What is God doing in the hands of men?
 - a. When we consider that Jesus is the One through whom God made the world and everything in it. In Eden God formed man from the dust with His hands and breathed life into us. And then here we have that God being delivered into the hands of men where we will not give breath and life to Him but take them from Him in a rage. It’s unthinkable!
- C. But the chain of events here is quite illuminating. While everyone is marveling at the majesty of God—the power Jesus demonstrated in freeing this boy and reuniting him to his father—Jesus quickly attempts to show His disciples the ultimate source for such a triumph. It’s ironic and

paradoxical, but the Christ's victory over demons, the salvation of the world, is found ultimately in the Messiah's death on a cross.

1. And He is jealous that they don't miss this: "Let these words sink into your ears . . ."
- D. But in spite of His plea here, it seems His words never make it in. There is something blocking, something in the way. They don't hear it. The way Luke puts it is there in v. 45a: But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it.
1. This is a bit enigmatic, and commentators go various ways with it. Some say it's God, others say it's Satan, still others say it's God permitting Satan.

They Were Afraid to Ask

- A. And though I lean towards that last camp, the thing I really want to bring out here is actually found in the statement that follows this: "[T]hey were afraid to ask him about this saying" (v. 45b).
1. To be sure, these disciples did hear something. Matthew's account of this says that upon hearing these things "they were greatly distressed" (Matt 17:23). So they got something of it. But they got enough to know they didn't want to know any more. "I don't want to ask Him about this saying. In fact, I think I want to plug my ears."
 - a. And this is the convicting point.
- B. We have to admit that there is something in us that gravitates towards certain verses in Scripture and away from others.
1. This is why people get Jer 29:11 stitched onto their throw pillows or done up with calligraphy all nice in a frame above their bed: "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." That sounds good. Tell me more!
 2. But I would wager nobody has Jer 29:15ff.: " ¹⁵ Because you have said, 'The Lord has raised up prophets for us in Babylon,' ¹⁶ thus says the Lord . . . ¹⁷ '[B]ehold, I am sending on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten they cannot be eaten . . . ¹⁹ because they did not pay attention to my words . . .'" That just doesn't have the same ring to it. And we kind of think: "I'm kind of afraid to ask what God means by that. So let's just go back to v. 11."
 - a. But when we press into these harder words we realize He tells us these things because He wants to prepare us, He wants to warn us, He wants to teach us . . . because He loves us.
- C. We have this tendency to go deaf to the full counsel of God. We tune in to what we want to hear and tune out to what we don't. And this vignette is here to say: "Don't do that!"

1. Think about it. These words about the Christ being killed, for them it was an outrage, a horror. They couldn't bear to hear it. But for us it's become our greatest joy and delight! We can't hear it enough.
 - a. We have to trust that God's word is good, period. Whatever we initially feel about it, He means good for us when He says it.
- D. So let me ask you: How are you doing with the full counsel of God? Do you actually want to hear a word from Him, or do you want to hear a word from Him only if it's what you want to hear? Do you have your go-to verses, your go-to books in the Bible, and then a bunch of other stuff you avoid?
 1. Maybe it's time to move towards those things and start asking questions. Open your ears. Don't be afraid. He means good for you in it.

Vignette #3: Rivalry (vv. 46-48)

An Ugly Irony

- A. The perspective we get on our sin here I would identify with the word "Rivalry". And here is where things start to get particularly ugly: "An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest" (v. 46).
 1. Does it get any more ironic then this?! "Let this sink into your ears: I am going to die for you!" "An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest." What is wrong with us?!
- B. "What's that Jesus? You're going to be delivered into the hands of man. Om, okay, whatever that means. But anyways, onto more pressing matters. We're all wondering here, maybe you can tell us, which one of us is the greatest? Peter's trying to claim that spot because He thinks it's clear he's Your favorite. I mean, you gave him that epic name change—from Simon to Peter = the Rock. He's the one who first confessed you as the Christ. You took him up on the mountain last night while most of us were back here sleeping. He said you showed him some things that he can't even talk about? But James and John seem to think they belong at the top as well. They're talking about how they above any of us should have the right to sit at your right and left hand in your kingdom. But we're not sure. Matthew's trying to say that he has the most dramatic conversion of all of us. I suppose our testimonies are relatively boring in comparison. He was a tax collector, a traitor, a thief, working for the enemy, and now here he is on team with the Messiah. But you know Bartholomew thinks the title should go to him just because his name is Bartholomew. So Jesus, okay, okay, you're going to die, whatever that means, but can you help us out here? Which one of us is the greatest?!"
- C. Their foolishness is astonishing, even comical, and then, it is, at last, convicting. Because it's me!
 1. John Stott wrote a book on preaching entitled *Between Two Worlds*. And in it he warns the preacher of pride. I'll never forget these words because I see myself in them: "Pride is without doubt the chief occupational hazard of the preacher. It has ruined many, and deprived their ministry of power. . . . In some it is blatantly obvious. They are exhibitionists by temperament and use the pulpit as a stage on which they show off. . . . Other preachers

are not like [these] Nebuchadnezzars, however, for their pride does not take the form of blatant boastfulness. It is more subtle, more insidious, and even more perverse. For it is possible to adopt an outward demeanor of great meekness, while inside our appetite for applause is insatiable. At the very moment when in the pulpit we are extolling the glories of Christ, we can in reality be seeking our own glory, and when we are exhorting the congregation to praise God, and are even ostensibly leading them in praise, we can be secretly hoping that they will spare a bit of praise for us. We need to cry out with Baxter, ‘O what a constant companion, what a tyrannical commander, what a sly, subtle and insinuating enemy is this sin of pride!’” (pp. 320-321).

- D. We can take the message of the cross and make it a means of self-glorification. It’s not just preachers who deal with this. It’s everyone in the pew.
 - 1. We like to think that if we can get people from the world into the church that we’ll solve the sin problem. But what we come to find out is that we take a lot of that same junk we had out there, and we just dress it up in religious robes.
 - a. Where our self-centered self-worship was once expressed in more obvious ways—i.e. adultery, lying, stealing, drunkenness, and the like.
 - b. In the church, it takes on more subtle even “sanitized” forms—we give to be seen, we pray to be heard, we preach to be praised, we evangelize so we can tell others about our courage for Christ on the streets, we read our Bibles so we can know more than the next guy and clean house in Bible trivia, or whatever.
 - i. It’s the same junk of the world now dressed up in its Sunday best. It’s disgusting, it’s wicked, but it’s all too common.

A Child

- A. And here’s what you have to love. Jesus’ remedy to this whole argument among the disciples is a child: “⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side⁴⁸ and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.” (vv. 47-48).
 - 1. Now understand, ancient cultures had no romantic, idealized understanding of children like we often do. In most ancient cultures children were regarded as a burden until they were physically able to start contributing to the family on their own.
- B. So Jesus, in essence, is saying: The one who’s great, the one who gets it, is the one who makes time for, and doesn’t hesitate to serve those whom the world considers to be the least, who provide very little return, those who don’t add anything to our image, but who, nonetheless, are made in the image of God and are precious to Him.
 - 1. You see the child tests the heart of the disciple.
 - a. If you’re in this to gain glory for yourself here and now, then you have no time for them.

- b. But if you know that Christ has come to serve you and to give His life as a ransom for you and that in Him you have your glory before the Father, then you're free to love the least of these. You don't need any return. You don't need anything from them. You have God in Christ. So you can give. You can love.
- C. That, Jesus says, is true greatness. Humility, self-sacrifice, love, service. Not rivalry, dissensions, comparisons, competition. There is no room for that among the people of the cross.

But Grace Prevails!

- A. Now, brothers and sisters, sin persists, but grace prevails. We'll look more at this next time, but let me at least say this as we close. Jesus doesn't see the junk in these guys and just leave them behind. He doesn't shrug them off or disown them. He's not embarrassed by them. He doesn't cut them from the team. In fact, in [Luke 10](#), He sends them out again—as His ambassadors, His representatives, His missionaries.
 - 1. He loves them! He sets His face not away from them, but “[toward Jerusalem](#)” (cf. [vv. 51, 53](#))—where He knows He's going to die for them. Our sin may be stubborn but the Savior's grace is more so! Though our sin persists, grace will ultimately prevail.
- B. Maybe as we talked about all these things—Independence, Deafness, Rivalry—you found yourself saying, “That's me, that's me, that's me.”
 - 1. Listen, these were Jesus' apostles here. In a sense, you're in good company. Own your junk, confess it, and know there is grace for you at the cross. He's not done with you no matter how much of a lost cause you feel you are.