

Sin Persists but Grace Prevails! (Part 2)

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)

Sin Persists but Grace Prevails!

- A. This is now our second week looking at this text. You recall from last time I brought our attention to the somewhat troubling reality that, even after we come to Christ, sin still persists in us in many ways.
 1. The way to glory and conformity to the image of Christ is much less like an elevator—we come into Christ and just go straight up to glory—and much more like a winding staircase—it meanders, it takes time, it might even feel like we’re going backwards at points, but all the while we are, in fact, ascending to our destination.
 - a. Sin may still persist in us, but grace will prevail in the end!

B. I think, in many ways, this is the point of the shape our narrative here in Luke takes on. We move immediately from the pronounced glory of the Mount of Transfiguration (vv. 28-36) to what now in our text is the almost laughable stupidity of the disciples.

1. In spite of all that they have seen and heard of Jesus to this point, they don't get it.

Even Jesus Has Unruly Kids

A. If I could speak something into the margin here, even in my introduction. This actually ministered to me as a parent of three little ones. Being a parent is hard. One of the things we're prone to think is that our parenting is the decisive influence on our children's behavior—whether for good or for bad.

1. And this is often reinforced by people around us, right?

a. When you see that kid in the check-out line at the grocery store throwing a tantrum because he wants a pack of Skittles or something, you're not thinking: "Yup, that kid's a little sinner just like me. I'm sure the parents are working hard to reach him and love him, but sin goes deep." Nope.

b. Don't you kind of look at the mother for a moment, size her up a bit, maybe look down your nose, and think: "Looks like someone's not doing her job. You're raising a spoiled little brat there. Parents these days. They're so soft and mushy!"

B. Listen to me, certainly the parents play a very important part in shaping the hearts and actions of their children, but we must remember that this is only part of the story.

1. I mean look at Jesus' "kids" here. You're not going to find a better trainer or teacher than Jesus. And yet here we are. Watching the people under His care acting like complete fools—totally misrepresenting the heart of their Master.

C. So mommy/daddy, if your kid is a bit unrefined and you're wondering what you've done, receive grace this morning. There's much more to the story. Your child is a sinner by nature, and that sin persists. Carry on with hope knowing that your labor is not in vain!

1. Even Jesus has some painfully wild and unruly kids.

Five Vignettes

A. I said last time that this text puts forward five vignettes, each highlighting a different way that sin still persists in these disciples and in us. Last week we looked at the first three.

1. We saw in vv. 37-43a that there is still a tendency towards Independence in these disciples. Mark tells us this kind of demon only comes out with prayer (and perhaps fasting) (Mark 9:29), implying that the disciples weren't doing either of these things. They were relying on their own strength, wisdom, experiences, instead of on Christ.

2. Vv. 43b-45 brought out this idea of Deafness. When Jesus reminds them again that He's come to die, they plug their ears, as it were. "And they were afraid to ask him about this saying" (v. 45b). "I don't like the sound of that. I don't want to hear any more."

3. And then in vv. 46-48, it just gets even uglier from here. Immediately following the prediction of Jesus' self-sacrificial death, they get into an argument about who's the greatest. This vignette, we said, highlights our deplorably propensity towards Rivalry—using the things of Christ and the church to exalt self, as a platform for my glory.

Sin Persists

Vignette #4: Tribalism (vv. 49-50)

The Progression

- A. If I were to put a word on the sin that we see persisting here it would be "Tribalism".
- B. There really is a progression through these last few vignettes. Where vignette #3 deals with rivalry within your own tribe so to speak—or we might even say: competition within your own local church, now, in vignette #4, this same kind of thing is extended out with reference to other tribes.
 1. Now it's not just me vs. you within our own group. Now it's my tribe vs. yours—or, again, my church, or my denomination, or my theological family vs. yours.

"Because He Does Not Follow with Us"

- A. Look at v. 49 again: "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.'"
 1. Did you catch that? There is someone out there, someone in another group, someone not a part of the Twelve, casting out demons in Jesus' name. He is having success in ministry, you could say. "But because he's not 'with us', we thought we should put an end to it. Who does he think he is?!"
- B. But Jesus is not impressed by John's logic here. Jesus knows what's in the heart of man. Think of this. What is it that the apostles were unable to do back up in vv. 37-43a? Cast out a demon. And what is it that this guy is successfully doing over there? Casting out a demon.
 1. Do you think that hurts the pride a little bit? Do you think that might be underneath the surface in John's heart? "If we couldn't do it, and we're the Twelve. I certainly don't want that guy doing it. People are going to start thinking he's better than us. We're the inner circle here, not him!"
- C. I'd be lying to you if I were to say I can't relate to John here. I hear about what other churches in the area are doing whether from friends, or websites, or Facebook. This church just hired a family pastor, this church just bought a new building, this church had 37 baptisms at its last service, this church's pastor just finished writing another book and it's on top of the charts on Amazon, this church's pastor has a PhD from seminary—not only does he do his devotions in the Greek New Testament, he's got the whole thing memorized.

1. Obviously, I'm exaggerating a little bit, but, if I'm honest with you, on my good days, I celebrate the victories in Christ won by those outside my tribe, my church. But, on my bad days, I hear of the successes of other ministers and ministries, and I'm so ashamed to admit it, but sometimes, rather than celebrate with them, I retreat into self-concern and find myself wondering: "How can I compete with that?"
 - a. "Compete?" "Compete?"—with your brother or sister in Christ? "Compete?"—with other pastors, other churches? What in the world is that? Where does that come from? I'll tell you where it comes from: the very pit of hell. It's the devil's logic. And it is no place in the Christian, in the church. God have mercy on me!

- D. As I was thinking on these things, repenting of these things afresh, I recalled something I've read by a guy named Andrew Wilson: "What if you spent years faithfully and earnestly praying for revival to come to your community, and then one day, seemingly out of the blue, God dramatically answered your prayers?"

All across your city, every day people begin crowding into the church to hear the gospel from God's Word. On the streets, in their workplaces, in classrooms and homes all over town, previously timid church members are faithfully declaring the gospel and fruit is coming fast. Lives are transformed, marriages are saved, and most of all, one after another God's enemies are laying down the weapons of their rebellion and are taking refuge in his glorious and merciful Son.

What if all this happened in your own town, right in front of your eyes . . . in that other guy's church, just a few blocks down the street from yours?

I suspect we all know what we ought to say in response, but the words of praise and joy are likely to get caught in the backs of our throats" (Pray for Revival—in the Other Guy's Church).

- E. And, of course, this isn't just the pastor's dilemma. Christians are notorious for defining themselves over and against other Christians. The schisms and the breaks, the "denominational tree".
 1. Have you ever seen these things? It is more like an ever-expanding weed, as one group leaves another group, this group thinks they're better than that group, that groups full of heretics, we're the only faithful church left, and on it goes . . . to Jesus' shame.
 - a. This is not to say that the distinctions in theology or philosophy or practice don't matter, but it is to say that somewhere along the way we often lose sight of the greater thing that unites us: namely, Jesus . . . and the cross.

"But He Is with Me"

- A. This is where Jesus is going to take His disciples, and us, next. Jesus, seeing this sort of thing in us, reorients us with His words: "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you."
 1. In essence, He's saying: "You're on the same team. He's casting out demons in My name. Why would you pin yourself against him?"

- B. Later Jesus will say something seemingly opposite to this statement here, but when we look closely, an important truth comes to light. In [Luke 11:23](#), He says: "Whoever is not with me is against me."

1. Now that looks, at first glance, to align with John's logic above right? "[W]e tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us" (v. 49). "And if he's not with us, he must be against us." But Jesus rebukes him. And then he wraps back around here later and seemingly says the same thing: "Whoever is not with me is against me" (11:23). How does this make any sense?
- C. The key, I think, is in the pronouns.
1. For John the decisive factor is whether the person is "with us"—the Twelve, our tribe. If he's not within our little group, he must be up to no good.
 2. But for Jesus, the decisive factor is not whether the person is with the Twelve, but whether he is "with Me".
- D. In other words: A person can be outside of our little tribe and still be with Jesus, and, hence, on our team. We often like to blend the two pronouns here so that if a person is not with us, he must not be with Jesus either. But Jesus is moving in precisely the opposite direction.
1. Mercy Hill, Acts 29, the reformed theological camp, etc. do not compose the sum total of the people of God. The kingdom of Christ is so much bigger than us! And we must remember that, however much it hurts our little egos.
 - a. There are plenty of people who are not with us who are still with Him. And, according to Jesus, that means they are not against us but for us. Therefore, we ought to be not against them but for them as well.

Identity Crisis

- A. Now why do we do this? Why does this sort of thing rise up in us? Well, I think this is the result of what we might call an identity crisis. This sort of tribalism results when we seek to define ourselves over and against others rather than defining ourselves in Christ.
- B. Paul says in Col 3:3 that "[I] have died, and [my] life is hidden with Christ in God." Christ is my identity. I am justified in Him, accepted in Him, loved in Him, successful in Him, secure in Him. It's not what I do over and against you that defines me but what He has done for me!
1. If I get this, I am free . . . free to celebrate what God does in you, what God does in the church down the street, because I am defined by Him, not by what I can accomplish in comparison to you.
- C. But, sadly, we're always drifting from this center, towards a self-centered sort of slavery. If I am unmoored from my identity in Christ, then it matters way too much to me that I be better than you. I have to be, if I am going to feel okay about myself. I still have something to prove. Your success threatens me at a fundamental level.
1. So I root for your losses. And I resent your wins. I villainize you before others and try to sway public opinion to my side. I am fundamentally insecure, a slave.
 - a. It's an identity crisis. And we need Christ back at the center.

D. This is the sort of thing that Paul is desperately trying to get the Corinthians to understand in [1 Cor 1:10-31](#). I'll read to you just a few verses of this here. Look at how it begins: "¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.' ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" ([1 Cor 1:10-13](#)).

1. Do you see this? They are wanting to go tribal here. They are wanting to divide into various groups based upon who converted them, who baptized them, who disciplined them, who leads their little clan, and they are defining themselves over and against the others, and "quarreling" with them.

E. And Paul is going to strip all of this away and say, "Listen, at the bottom what unites you is far greater than what divides: Christ . . . and the cross. You're trying to say you are wiser, and stronger, and more significant than the others, but I am telling you . . . '²⁷ God chose what is foolish . . .; God chose what is weak . . .; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised . . ., ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" ([1 Cor 1:27-31](#)).

1. Stop boasting in yourselves and start boasting in the Lord. It's this "boast[ing] in the Lord" that destroys any notion of tribalism.
 - a. Whether you are in this church or that one, whether you are in this denomination or that one; whether you read this version of that Bible or that one, whether you wear a tie to church, or jeans, or some hipster blend of both; whether you have contemporary music or you've got a pipe organ.
 - i. Whatever the case may be, if we are both "with Jesus", then we are on the same team.

F. So let me ask you: Is your identity anchored in Jesus? Are you defining yourself in Him— what He has said about you, what He has done for you? Does the success of others threaten you? Does the failure of others secretly please you? Jesus is with us in this journey to help us re-anchor ourselves again and again in Him.

Vignette #5: Animosity (vv. 51-55)

A. Now, for this last vignette, obviously I have to move quickly, but the essence of it is this: We move from the Rivalry that takes place within our own church, to the Tribalism that can take place between various churches or groups of Christians, to, now, what I would call the "Animosity" that can exist between the church and the world.

1. It's the same basic issue, just brought into a different context, with the heat turned up a bit (quite literally).

- B. In the text here, were talking about “the Samaritans” (v. 52). The half-breed—half Jew, half Gentile—therefore, considered by strict Jews, to be wholly unclean. Due to a long history of conflict each side has come to despise the other.
1. This is why when these Samaritans see that Jesus is heading towards “Jerusalem” (v. 51), land of the Jews, well they refuse to be of any help to Him.
 - a. And James and John are ready to follow suit, even to up the ante a little bit: “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (v. 54). No doubt they thought this was an honorable thing for them to consider. “Don’t let them treat you this way. We will defend you against this kind of disrespect.”
- C. But it is so terribly out of touch with what the Savior has truly come to do.
1. He will say it again and again. John 12:47b: “I did not come to judge the world but to save [it].” Or Mark 10:45: “[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
 - a. Will He come again to judge the living and the dead? Absolutely. But for now “His face [is] set toward Jerusalem” (v. 53) where He will be judged in our place, so that the offer of the gospel could go unto the ends of the earth . . . and then the end will come.
- D. So James and John run ahead of the Savior here. That is why we read next: “But he turned and rebuked them” (v. 55). “Brothers, do you not see? The fire you would call down on these Samaritans, I will soon call down on Myself on the cross!”
- E. Perhaps we have found ourselves in the same sort of spirit when in discussion with unbelievers. We claim to be standing for truth, but we forfeit love in the process.
1. How do we feel about the unbelieving? Are they opponents upon whom we sure would like to call fire down upon? Or are they lost souls just like we have been, and we would be willing to lay down our lives for them if it would help them see our Savior?!

But Grace Prevails!

- A. At this point we must be willing to say how little we know of ourselves and our own hearts. That is one of the critical points this text brings out.
1. We are so prone to think we are fine, even when we’re not. These disciples didn’t see these things in themselves. But Jesus does, and though sin persists, His grace prevails.
- B. It’s amazing! John and James are the two apostles featured in these last two vignettes. Do you want to know what becomes of them, what Jesus makes of them in the end?

1. Well, James gives his life for the gospel: “[Herod the king] killed James the brother of John with the sword” (Acts 12:2). He’s not calling down fire, he’s loving even unto death.
2. And John? Well, the guy who wanted to stop the ministry of anyone who was not in his little clique, writes against this very thing in his third epistle.
 - a. There were these traveling Christian missionaries, “strangers” he calls them (3 John 5), from other churches in other places. And while some in the church were welcoming and supporting these missionaries, a guy by the name of Diotrephes was not. And John speaks out against this writing: “⁹ Diotrephes . . . likes to put himself first . . . ¹⁰ [H]e refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church” (vv. 9–10).
 - i. And he says this is “evil” (v. 11). He gets it! Grace is prevailing in his heart.
- C. And it will prevail in ours as well. So are you starting to see this stuff in you? Don’t be surprised? Don’t hide? Own it, name it, confess it, bring it to the One who can help. Bring it to the One who gives the greater grace!