

“...The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live...” (Ecclesiastes 9:3)

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before the high God?
He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
and what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:6,8)*

So shall it not be among you: the nature of true greatness and real power

Part 3¹

Let these sayings sink down into your ears

luke 9.^{28-36, 44-45}

²⁸*About an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. ²⁹And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering. ³⁰And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: ³¹who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him.

³³*As they departed from him, Peter said unto Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias:” not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. ³⁵And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, “This is my beloved Son: hear him.” ³⁶And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone. And they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen.

⁴⁴“Let these sayings sink down into your ears: for the Son of man shall be delivered into the hands of men.” ⁴⁵But they understood not this saying, and it was hid from them, that they perceived it not: and they feared to ask him of that saying.

Introduction to the series

Mine is not, of course, the only way to structure or understand the synoptic Gospels. But it is one way. And it is a way that speaks to me. Perhaps it will speak to you as well.

As I understand the movement of the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—

¹ In this series of homilies, we will explore the topic of “The Nature of True Greatness and Real Power” through the following texts: Matthew 16.¹³⁻²³; Matthew 16.²⁴⁻²⁶; Luke 9.^{28-36, 44-45}; Mark 9.³³⁻³⁵ & Matthew 18.²⁻⁴; Luke 9.⁵¹⁻⁵⁶; Mark 10.³⁵⁻⁴⁵; Matthew 21.¹⁻⁵; and Philipians 2.¹⁻¹¹; Revelation 5.¹⁻⁷

approximately the first half of their narratives regularly report on miracles that Jesus performed in a very public demonstration of his greatness and power. Between the three synoptic Gospels, nearly 75% of the miracles traditionally identified as having been performed by Jesus (and over 80% in the case of Matthew and Mark) were reported in the first half of the Gospels.^a

For example, in his book of roughly 24,000 words (in the KJV), Matthew records twenty-three traditionally identified miracles performed by Jesus. By the 12,000-word mark, Matthew has already recorded nineteen of them, leaving but four for the final 12,000 words. It is around the 12,000-word mark that Matthew arrives at Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," with Jesus' accompanying warning of his impending rejection and death, Peter's rebuke of Jesus, and Jesus' necessary rebuke of Peter as the latter demonstrates his misunderstanding concerning the true meaning and nature of Messianic greatness and power reflected in Jesus' miracles.

These observations are more than a trifling bit of math wizardry. Peter's confession represents a turning point in the Gospels, and, perhaps, in Jesus' ministry. With this confession and rebuke comes a shift in emphasis and purpose. The second half of the synoptic Gospels' arc contains far, far fewer reports of miracles. Replacing these reports of miracles are reports of Jesus' attempts to help his disciples understand the true nature of the greatness and power that they accurately witness in his miracles. In addition, it is in association with Peter's confession that Jesus speaks for the first time directly and openly of his looming rejection and death. He will, the text informs us, "from that time forth" issue predictions and warnings concerning his ultimate rejection and death.

Perhaps this Gospel structure represented a reality and necessity of Jesus' actual earthly ministry. Perhaps the Gospel writers (or me) imposed the structure upon Jesus' earthly ministry in order to teach a principle that they had gleaned from Jesus' earthly ministry. Either way, there is much to learn from this structure.

Here is one of the principles we can glean from the structure. It is the principle upon which this series of homilies focuses. It is a principle, I believe, that Jesus himself held and lived

by. It is a principle, I believe, that he attempted to pass on to his disciples.

True greatness and power; the kind of greatness and power that God exercises is something completely different than what the world imagines it to be. God possesses and exercises greatness and power very differently and out of very different motives than human beings themselves possess and wield greatness and power, such as it is. Further, God possesses and exercises greatness and power very differently and out of very different motives than human beings imagine and expect that *He* does. Finally, human beings must resist and reject the world's false ideas of the nature of greatness and power and adopt those of God. Only by so doing can human beings possess even the slightest glimmer of hope for peace in this world and an abiding existence in the world to come. To exercise greatness and power in a manner contrary to God's manner is to invite chaos and sure annihilation and extinction.

In this series of homilies we make the same points over and over again. We do so in a variety of ways. Hopefully, the repetition does grow weary. But, the fact is, the world as it is today is proof positive that it has not heard or heeded our Lord's warning voice. The world continues to suffer under notions of greatness and power that can only be described as anti-Christ. So, apparently, one can't speak the words of God too often. One can't speak too often of the nature of true greatness and real power as it exists in God and as it must exist in mortals. And, of course, the word of God never, ever grows mundane, but remains always vibrant and lively and quick and powerful and discerning.

Finally, a reminder. What we are doing here is homily, not commentary. We cannot, then, leave it at explication and discovery. We must move to application. We hope that this series encourages the reader to examine their own attitudes toward greatness and their own use of power, such as it is. In addition, we hope that the reader examines the world around them; examines those who are thought great and who exercise power in their community, in their church, in their state, in their nation—in their life—and hold them up against Jesus' standard. Do they, imperfect as they are, strive to exercise power as Jesus exercised it and as Jesus taught his disciples to exercise it? If so, then praise God. If not, then they must be challenged to do and be better. If they refuse to repent, they must be rejected and we more skilled in choosing to whom we grant power.

Very practical and applicable, this series of homilies.

introduction

Jesus' disciples were impressed. They had witnessed Jesus exercise incredible power in healing individuals with all manner of physical and emotional afflictions. He had given sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the speechless, and clear skin to the leper. He had controlled and conquered demons, even legions of them, and commanded the forces of nature, calming angry seas and feeding hungry multitudes. He had adroitly fended off the attacks of Judah's greatest religious minds who were antagonistic toward him. When, at Caesarea Philippi, then, Jesus asked, "Whom say ye that I am?" Peter, answering for all the disciples, triumphantly confessed, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus, they had concluded, was the Messiah.

It is at just this glorious moment that Jesus, sensing that this confession meant something different to his disciples than it did to him, applied his first corrective to their false notions of him and his Messiahship by offering his first of several dark warnings concerning his future.

"From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day."²

With this unwelcome personal Messianic testimony, Peter's confession turned astonishingly and quickly satanic as he "rebuked" Jesus. Peter's confession and rebuke, together, offer the best understanding concerning how the disciples viewed Jesus at this stage of his ministry. Jesus' rejoinder to Peter's satanic rebuke offers a clear understanding of Jesus' own view of himself, his Messiahship, the meaning of discipleship, and the nature of true greatness and power.

² Matthew 16.²¹

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”³

In light of Jesus’ own undeniable power, and in order to correct his disciples’ obstinate false notions concerning him, his Messiahship, and what their own discipleship entailed, Jesus would be under necessity of repeating over and over again his dark warning and his unorthodox view concerning the nature of true greatness and real power. These correctives often came in moments when Jesus’ greatness and power was most evident. On the face of it, Jesus’ dark warnings stood in stark contrast to the glory of the moment. His transfiguration on a mount in Caesarea Philippi was one such moment. In this homily, we turn our attention to this event and its immediate aftermath.

ttransfiguration

The synoptics are agreed that a week passed between Peter’s confession/rebuke and Jesus’ transfiguration.⁴ While praying on an unnamed mount, Jesus’ physical appearance and even his clothing were altered, whereupon Moses and Elijah appeared and conversed with him. While all three synoptic Gospels record the event, only Luke records any part of the conversation. We can imagine any number of subjects that these three might have discussed, many of them glorious and heady. But Luke tells us only that they “spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.”

We should note this important juxtaposition. During what must surely have been one of the most glorious moments in Jesus’ entire mortal life, discussion turned to what must surely have been the darkest moment in Jesus’ entire mortal life. Yet, this darkest of moments, his final suffering and death, was the greatest demonstration of divine greatness and power and glory exhibited in Jesus’ entire mortal life.

³ Matthew 16.²⁴⁻²⁵

⁴ According to Matthew and Mark, six days have passed since Peter’s confession/rebuke. According to Luke, eight days.

But there is something else that only Luke records. During this depressing discussion of Jesus' looming death—a death that was, itself, glorious—“Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep.” We can be quite certain that this notice is not intended as commentary on the disciple's sleep deprivation or physically exhaustion. Rather, we should understand that just as Jesus' disciples could not abide, without offering a rebuke, Jesus' first warning concerning his approaching rejection and death, they could not abide the depressing conversation focused on that same rejection and death that took place during Jesus' transfiguration.

At every stage of Jesus' ministry, the message of Jesus' humiliation and the reality of that humiliation was not only beyond the disciples' comprehension, it was beyond their ability or willingness to accept. It is Mark who informs us that even as Jesus began his descent into the pains of hell in Gethsemane, the disciples were found sleeping. Once more, however, they were not sleeping out of a lack of sleep, but “for sorrow.”⁵

Avoidance, even through slumber, was preferable to facing the reality of Jesus' humiliation and death. Indeed, the periodically recorded apostolic slumber seems almost a Gospel cypher for the disciples' habitual avoidance and even rejection of Jesus' unwelcome message.

Even in their avoidance of the unwelcome, however, the disciples could appreciate and celebrate the glory of the transfiguring event. Even as Peter offered his recommendation for memorializing the sacred event—“let us make three tabernacles..., not knowing what he said”—the celebratory moment was interrupted with a “voice out of the cloud,”

“This is my beloved Son: hear him.”

Now, I suppose one could read this as a simple and general admonition. “You are always to pay attention and act upon everything that comes from Jesus' mouth.” But one wonders if, perhaps, the admonition wasn't more context driven, and so a little more specific than that. “Listen to what my Son is telling you about himself, about his Messiahship, about his impending rejection and death, about the self-sacrifice that will be expected of you, about the

⁵ Luke 22.⁴⁵

unexpected nature of true greatness and real power.”

Another burst bubble

According to Matthew, as the party descended, Jesus charged his disciples, “tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.”⁶ Jesus regularly requested that those to whom he ministered keep their experience with him private. Indeed, just a week earlier and after Peter’s confession, Jesus had “charged his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.”⁷ There might have been many reasons for such requests. But one suspects, and the texts in places seem to confirm, that Jesus’ concern centered on the fact that his words, his actions, and his character would be, as they were by his disciples, misunderstood. His Messiahship would be thought of in the old false terms rather than the unorthodox terms in which he viewed himself and the nature of his greatness and power.

In addition, Jesus’ disciples apparently did not notice that Jesus’ use of his power had always served the needs of others rather than his own. Power was not to be used for self-aggrandizement. We should note that when, perhaps, Jesus did exercise his power for his own needs, it was done in as subdued a manner as possible so as not to draw undue attention.

Though the occurrence is not traditionally identified as a “miracle,” consider Jesus’ apparent exercise of power at Nazareth in the opening days of his ministry. Returning from his 40-day desert trial, Jesus attended synagogue on a sabbath day. During the service, he was invited to read from one of the synagogue’s sacred scrolls. Whether at his own choosing or another’s, he read from Isaiah, itself a profound bit of reversal.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor;
he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted,
to preach deliverance to the captives,

⁶ Matthew 17.⁹ Mark adds, here, that the disciples “kept that saying with themselves, questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean” (9.¹⁰).

⁷ Matthew 16.²⁰

and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty them that are bruised,
To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”⁸

Upon finishing his reading, he indicated that the ministry upon which he was embarking would be consistent with the spirit of the reading. Questioned about his assertion, Jesus then warned against rejecting him as Israelite widows and lepers had rejected Elijah and Elisha. Instead, they should follow the example of a Sidonian widow and Syrian leper who had trusted those same two prophets and thus received the assistance that they so desperately needed. This contrast infuriated his audience. Those present

“rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong.”

But, the evangelist reports, “he passing through the midst of them went his way.”⁹

Notice how subdued and understated this is. No explanation. No fanfare. No thunder and lightning. No warning voices from heaven. No trembling of the earth. Jesus simply passes through without a word or extraordinary act.

For those looking, Jesus’ greatness and power would not be found in his own acts of self-preservation. His power would not be used for his own self-aggrandizement. Messianic greatness, power, and, ultimately, victory would come through loss of self, through rejection, through suffering, and through death. Jesus would, himself, exhibit his true greatness in dying to serve and save others. Jesus’ greatest power would be exercised from the height of a condemning and humiliating cross rather than the royal trappings of a glittering golden throne

Having completed his descent from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus was met by a father and his demon possessed son who was in need of an exorcism—a throng of onlookers

⁸ Luke 4.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

⁹ Luke 4.²⁹⁻³⁰

surrounding them. It is a fascinating story with much to teach us. But we must stay on point.

Needless to say, Jesus healed the afflicted youth. As always, those who witnessed the healing “were all amazed at the mighty power of God.” “But while they wondered every one at all things which Jesus did,” Jesus, turning his attention to his disciple, addressed them directly and privately,

“Let these sayings sink down into your ears: for the Son of man shall be delivered into the hands of men.”

At the very first opportunity after the manifestations of his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration and the manifestation of his power in healing the demon possessed youth, Jesus took his disciples aside for a private moment of instruction. In that instruction, Jesus unsheathed his pin and popped another bubble. Jesus could not be too careful. He felt the need to pop every and any false notion concerning what these things meant; what they suggested about him; what they said about his greatness and power.

Conclusion and benediction

In epiphany like fashion, Peter gloriously declared Jesus to be the Christ. Lest Peter and the other disciples apply a false meaning to Jesus’ Messiahship, Jesus immediately followed this confession up with his bubble busting warning of his future and personal humiliation. Rebuked by Peter for what sounded to him like heterodoxic pessimism, Jesus identified Satan as the source of such an apostolic rebuke. Further, he instructed his disciples that all those who chose to follow him would be required to apply the same self-sacrificing attitude and behavior in their lives that Jesus exhibited and would exhibit in his.

Just days later, while sleep-walking through a heavenly discussion about Jesus’ future rejection and death, the disciples saw Jesus’ divine glory burst forth on the Mount of Transfiguration. In Peter’s suggestion that the event be memorialized through the construction of three monuments, we sense the apostles’ wonder and their hopeful

expectations rise once more. No doubt this wonder and sense of a glorious future rose yet more as they witnessed additional evidence of his glory and power in the healing of the demon possessed youth. Hoping to tap down a resurging and false expectation concerning Jesus and his irresistible dominance in this world, Jesus took the very first opportunity he had to be alone with his disciples to once more burst their bubble of false expectations.

“Let these sayings sink down into your ears: for the Son of man shall be delivered into the hands of men.”

If “these sayings” sank down at all in the disciples, their sinking down, at least at the time, served only to confuse and perplex and discourage rather than inform and inspire and motivate. We cannot be too hard on the disciples. The world that Jesus envisioned, the world he came to establish is, indeed, as his mother prophesied, a topsy-turvy world. It stands in stark contrast to the world as it existed then and as it exists today. The world, to this day, has not understood the true nature of Jesus’ greatness and power or the nature of greatness and power as it exists in the heavens or as exemplified in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Today is as good a time as any for us to come to terms with the level of self-sacrifice that is required of us if we are to become the true disciples that we wish to be. It is a good time to exercise whatever humble levels of greatness and power that we possess as he did; to use them for the advancement of others and to reject all thought of self-aggrandizement. Today is as good a time as any to acknowledge and confess that until we do so, we act only to repeat Peter’s satanic rebuke of the Lord Jesus and to frustrate our greatest hopes for true greatness, real power, and enduring eternal glory.

And, as always, today is as good a time as any to ask yourself, “How am I doing in my exercise of power, such as it is?” How are others whom you think great and who wield power doing? Are they following, or striving to follow as best they can the divine example of true greatness and real power that Jesus so perfectly exemplified? If they are not, are you bold enough and faithful enough to admonish them? Are you bold enough and faithful enough to turn away from them if they refuse correction and repentance? Are you enough of a disciple of Jesus to do that? The world is counting on just such bold and faithful discipleship. It is

counting on you.

*“With my whole heart have I sought thee:
O let me not wander from thy commandments.
Thy word have I hid in mine heart,
that I might not sin against thee.
Blessed art thou, O Lord:
teach me thy statutes.”¹⁰*

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

¹⁰ Psalm 119.¹⁰⁻¹²

^a Following is a breakdown of Jesus' traditional miracles along with their distribution throughout the Gospels. Because John seems to possess an agenda even more radically different than even the very different agendas of the three synoptic Gospels, I have and will focus only on those three synoptic Gospels in my analysis.

Miracle	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Water turned to wine				2. ¹⁻¹¹
Nobleman's son healed				4. ⁴⁶⁻⁵⁴
Draught of fish			5. ⁴⁻¹¹	
Man with unclean spirit healed		1. ²¹⁻²⁷	4. ³¹⁻³⁶	
Peter's mother-in-law healed	8. ¹⁴⁻¹⁵	1. ³⁰⁻³¹	4. ³⁸⁻³⁹	
A multitude of sick healed	8. ¹⁶	1. ³²⁻³⁴	4. ⁴⁰⁻⁴¹	
Leper healed	8. ²⁻⁴	1. ⁴⁰⁻⁴²	5. ¹²⁻¹³	
Palsied man healed	9. ²⁻⁷	2. ³⁻¹²	5. ¹⁸⁻²⁵	
Crippled man healed at Bethesda				5. ¹⁻⁹
Man with withered hand healed	12. ¹⁰⁻¹³	3. ¹⁻⁵	6. ⁶⁻¹⁰	
Centurion's son healed	8. ⁵⁻¹³		7. ¹⁻¹⁰	
Nain widow's son raised from dead			7. ¹¹⁻¹⁵	
Calming the storm at sea	8. ²³⁻²⁷	4. ³⁷⁻⁴¹	8. ²²⁻²⁵	
Man with legions healed	8. ²⁸⁻³⁴	5. ¹⁻¹⁵	8. ²⁷⁻³⁹	
Woman with issue of blood healed	9. ²⁰⁻²²	5. ²⁵⁻²⁹	8. ⁴³⁻⁴⁸	
Jarius' daughter raised from dead	9. ^{18-19, 23-25}	5. ^{22-24, 38-42}	8. ^{41-42, 49-56}	
Two blind men healed	9. ²⁷⁻³¹			
A possessed mute man healed	9. ³²⁻³³			
Man with "devil," blind & dumb healed	12. ²²		11. ¹⁴	
Feeding of 5,000	14. ¹⁵⁻²¹	6. ³⁵⁻⁴⁴	9. ¹²⁻¹⁷	6. ⁶⁻¹³
Jesus walks on water	14. ²⁵	6. ⁴⁸⁻⁵¹		6. ¹⁹⁻²⁰
Multitudes healed in Gennesaret	14. ³⁴⁻³⁶	6. ⁵³⁻⁵⁶		
Syrophenician woman's daughter healed	15. ²¹⁻²⁸	7. ²⁴⁻³⁰		
Many, including deaf & dumb healed	15. ²⁹⁻³¹	7. ³¹⁻³⁷		
Feeding of 4,000	15. ³²⁻³⁸	8. ¹⁻⁹		
Blind healed at Bethsaida		8. ²²⁻²⁶		
Peter's confession	16.¹³⁻²⁰	8.²⁷⁻³⁰	9.¹⁸⁻²¹	
Demonic son healed	17. ¹⁴⁻¹⁸	9. ¹⁷⁻²⁹	9. ³⁸⁻⁴³	
Coin taken from fish	17. ²⁴⁻²⁷			
Man born blind healed			11. ¹⁴	9. ¹⁻⁷
Crippled woman healed			13. ¹⁰⁻¹⁷	
Man with dropsy healed			14. ¹⁻⁴	
Lazarus raised from dead				11. ¹⁻⁴⁴

Ten lepers healed			17. ¹¹⁻¹⁹	
Two blind (Bartimaeus) healed	20. ²⁹⁻³⁴	10. ⁴⁶⁻⁵²	18. ³⁵⁻⁴³	
Fig tree cursed and withered	21. ¹⁸⁻²²	11. ^{12-14, 20-25}		
Soldier's severed ear healed			22. ⁵⁰⁻⁵¹	
	19/4 (23/83% before)	17/3 (20/85% before)	15/7 (22/68% before)	5/2 (7/71% before)
Synoptic 23/9 (31 total /74% before)				