

“...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 5¹

Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of

Luke 9.⁵¹⁻⁵⁶

⁵¹*When the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, ⁵²and sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. ⁵³And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem. ⁵⁴And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?”

⁵⁵But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.

⁵⁶For the Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” And they went to another village.

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—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

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 9.³³⁻³⁷ & Matthew 18.²⁻⁴; Luke 9.⁵¹⁻⁵⁶; Mark 10.³⁵⁻⁴⁵; Matthew 21.¹⁻⁵; and Philippians 2.¹⁻¹¹; Revelation 5.¹⁻⁷

performed by Jesus (and over 80% in the case of Matthew and Mark) were reported in the first half of the Gospels.¹

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 to today's homily

It was in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked his question, “Whom say ye that I am.” It was in Caesarea Philippi that Peter answered immediately, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” It was in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus followed this apostolic confession up with a warning concerning his upcoming rejection, suffering, and death. It was in Caesarea Philippi that Peter immediately rebuked Jesus for such negativity and his unfaithfulness to Peter’s idea of Jesus, his Messiahship, and his greatness and power. It was in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus firmly identified Peter’s false ideas of Jesus, his Messiahship, and the nature of his greatness and power as selfish and, worse, satanic.²

It was in Caesarea Philippi, too, that Jesus began to teach that not only he, but all those who would be his disciples would be required to lose themselves, deny themselves in order to find and save themselves. True greatness and power—that of Master and follower—was to be found in taking up the cross³ and losing themselves in the service and advancement others.

It was a mere six or eight days later, depending on the Gospel writer, that the disciples found themselves with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Here they were alert to Jesus’ glory as he met with Moses and Elijah. But they slumbered in denial as the three great Hebrew prophets discussed Jesus’ upcoming rejection and death in the nation’s capital, Jerusalem. Observing his disciple’s continued resistance to any suggestion of his failure—and their continued willful misunderstanding concerning the true nature of his greatness and power—Jesus took the first possible opportunity he had to be alone with his disciples to reissue his dire warning of rejection and death.

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

² All of this is examined in Part 1 of this series.

³ This is examined in Part 2 of this series.

the hands of men.”⁴

Shortly after the warnings and admonitions at Caesarea Philippi and at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus either overheard or discerned his disciples’ argument concerning which of them would be greatest in the kingdom of God—an argument that is both startling and telling in view of the previous instruction and warnings Jesus had only recently provided. Understanding that his disciples had not yet grasped the self-denial that was part and parcel of true greatness and real power, Jesus brought forth a child to illustrate true greatness. The child represented the sort of submission and humility (humiliation) that was required for entrance into that glorious kingdom.⁵

In today’s text, Jesus and his disciples are, as they so often are, on the road again. As they approach a Samaritan village, they send messengers ahead to announce his arrival. Perhaps he seeks rest and refreshment for himself and his disciples. Perhaps he plans to teach the village’s populace as is his habit. Either way, the Samaritans make it known that they want nothing to do with him. He is denied entrance to the city. His disciples are incensed by the Samaritans’ rejection of Jesus—surprise!—and suggest that maybe a violent, retributive act is in order. Jesus sees yet again, that his disciples have no clue concerning the nature of greatness and power—his own or that of those who would enter the Father’s kingdom. Thus, he firmly rebuffs their inappropriate response to his rejection, and instructs them once more.

He steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem

As we meet Jesus and his disciples in today’s text, they are headed south out of Galilee and into Judah, with Jerusalem as their final destination. At least, that is the disciples’ view. But what is Jesus’ view as he walks south toward Jerusalem? When he looks forward to arrival in Jerusalem, what does he see? Among other things, he sees that Jerusalem is not, in fact, his

⁴ We examined the events on the Mount of Transfiguration along with Jesus’ renewed warning in Part 3 of this series.

⁵ We examined this episode in Part 4 of this series.

final destination. Rather, Jerusalem will serve as a springboard. For it is from there that he will “be received up.” He is headed to Jerusalem for his ascension. His final destination is heaven, with the seat on the right hand of God that is awaiting him.

Of course, he knows that much will transpire before he finally ascends. There will be rejection and humiliation. There will be much suffering and there will be an agonizing death. Nevertheless, Jesus’ faith in his Father and his commitment to do his Father’s will is such that nothing can deter him. Thus, we are informed, he traveled with his face set in determination and resolve as “he *steadfastly* set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

As Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem with steadfastness, we can almost read his courageous thoughts. They sound much like the words that he will later speak openly when Peter unsheathes his sword to protect Jesus from arrest:

“The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?”⁶

“Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?”⁷

Jesus had many things to do and say. They were all of immense importance, both to individuals and societies, in time and in eternity. But above all else, Jesus testified, “I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.”⁸ And, come what may, he was determined to do that holy will until that day on which “he should be received up.” He would then, from a new and holier sphere, continue to do “the will of him that sent me.”

⁶ John 18.¹¹

⁷ Matthew 25.²³⁻²⁴

⁸ John 6.³⁸

They did not receive him

But, on the way to his heavenly throne, he would pass through the district of Samaria. We should say a word or two about the people known as Samaritans.

Upon returning to their promised land after the Babylonian exile, exiled Jews found a population whom they thought of as “half-breeds.” These were people descended from lower class Israelites, whom first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians had left behind to work the land and provide tax revenues, and “gentiles.” Afflicted with xenophobic fears, prejudices, and hatreds, the returning Jews wanted nothing to do with these “half-breed” Samaritans. Jewish fear and prejudice and hatred for the Samaritans resulted in the latter’s religious disenfranchisement, including exclusion from the temple in Jerusalem.

Unsurprisingly, the Samaritans responded in kind, going so far as to build their own temple on Mount Gerizim, home to one of the most ancient sacred sites in the land. The back-and-forth hatreds and incriminations that pass between modern day Israelis and Palestinians have nothing on those that passed between Jews and Samaritans. Only our “improvements” in the technology of violence and institutional murder have changed.

So it was that when the Samaritans realized that Jesus was headed to Jerusalem, likely to attend a Passover festival from which they themselves were so hatefully excluded, they denied him entrance to the city, the benefits of its accommodations, and open, listening ears.

Fire from heaven

This cultural and retaliatory Samaritan refusal of hospitality infuriated Jesus’ disciples. No doubt, they were infuriated by the refusal itself. They have already shown themselves to be resistant to the possibility of any rejection or failure on Jesus’ part. But it seems likely that centuries of hostility between Jew and Samaritan also played a role in the disciples’ extremist response to the Samaritan snub.

Such “snubbery” of the Messiah, the disciple’s concluded, was surely an offense, not only against Messiah, but against God as well. No doubt, the disciples were familiar with Yahweh’s warning to those who “set themselves” against God and his anointed. “Why,” asked God,

“Why do the heathen rage,
and the people imagine a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD,
and against his anointed.”

Then, in response to such vanity,

“He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh:
the Lord shall have them in derision.
Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath,
and vex them in his sore displeasure.”⁹

Such threats are ubiquitous in the Psalmist. No doubt, the disciples heard such threats read and quoted regularly in synagogue.

Perhaps Elijah was still on the disciples’ minds after his visit with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration; for it was from Elijah’s ministry that the disciples found the perfect way to express God’s wrath and to vex the Samaritans for the “rage” against and resistance to Jesus, Messiah, that they had manifested in their rejection of him. You might remember that Elijah had called down fire from heaven. Twice, in fact. Two times he had called down fire from heaven in order to burn Israelite military units of fifty to a crisp. Thus, taking Elijah as their example, the disciples boldly offered their proposal for righting the wrong done to Jesus.

⁹ See Psalm 1.^{1-2, 4-5}

“Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?”

It didn't hurt either, of course, that the response displayed a greatness and power that was appropriately violent, according to what the world expected a slight as this one to produce. At the same time, it represented a display of greatness and power that rose to appropriately otherworldly, cosmic proportions.

Yet another rebuke

But Jesus “turned, and rebuked them.”

If, as you have followed Jesus and his disciples, you feel that there was a great deal of rebuking going on, you are not wrong. It wasn't all that long ago that Peter “rebuked” Jesus for having the audacity to suggest that he, Jesus, would experience rejection, suffering and death at the hands of wicked and inferior men. Jesus followed up Peter's rebuke with his own rebuke of Peter and his satanic inspired denial of Jesus' inspired foresight. Not long afterward, Jesus, using a child to exemplify the nature of true greatness, illustrated rather than spoke a rebuke of the disciples' argument over who would be the greatest in the kingdom—an argument for which they felt shame and tried to keep hidden from Jesus.

Now, here is Jesus rebuking his disciples once more. It should not be necessary to point out that each of these rebukes revolve around the nature of greatness and power and how they are manifested and practiced.

Contrary to the false worldly traditions that the disciples had inherited, including those they imagined that they had inherited from their beloved Hebrew forebearers, greatness and power are not manifest through the exercise of violence. They are not measured by one's ability to achieve violent retribution and pay back. The disciples' belief that Jesus might wish to

exercise his greatness and power in such a worldly manner revealed two sad realities.

First, though the disciples knew not “what manner of spirit [they were] of,” their instinctual desire to resort to violence revealed to Jesus, and anyone else who possessed even the smallest portion of the spirit, the kind of people they were. They were men thoroughly captured by a sinful world that took its cue from Satan—“I will buy up armies and navies and reign with blood and horror on the earth.” It was his, Satan’s, spirit of which they partook when they made their foul suggestion that fire be called down from heaven.

Worse yet, even after all that they had seen Jesus say and do they still did not perceive “what manner of spirit” Jesus was of. They did not understand the nature of his greatness and power and how he intended to use them. It had never occurred to him to punish the Samaritans for having turned him away. It never *could* occur to him. It was utterly contrary to the “manner of spirit” that possessed him. It was contrary to his character, incompatible with his disposition. How, after all this time, could they not understand that “the Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them”? It takes little power to destroy—it is, in fact the universe’s natural entropic way. It takes far, far greater power to save. This power to halt and reverse destructive power and to exercise saving and restorative power is one of the things that makes God, God.

They went to another village

Having allowed Jesus to make this point, the text states simply, “And they went to another village.” Talk about understatement!

As we leave the village behind, in our mind’s eye we look back over our shoulder to gaze at the Samaritan village. We imagine what might have been had the spirit of which the disciples were had had its way. We imagine burnt out husks of blackened buildings. We imagine trees with their blackened trunks turned to carbon and reaching forlornly into an angry sky. We imagine blackened hunks of roasted human flesh; corpses burnt into

stiffened, unnatural, inhuman, and grotesque shapes and poses and postures.

But, thanks to Jesus, as we gaze back at the village we see it glistening in the late evening sun as it was the night before and the night before that. We see a city that has been delivered from the threat of fire from heaven. We see a people that might well have been burnt to a crisp but for Jesus and the way he exercises greatness and true power. Yes, we see a city populace oblivious to the fact that Jesus has saved their lives.

If Jesus looked for accommodations or listening ears, he would find them elsewhere without giving the Samaritans and their inhospitality another thought. He would bear no grudge. If he thought of them at all, he no doubt felt joy that they remained alive—alive to repent another day. If he thought of them at all, he mourned that he had captured no listening ear to hear his message of deliverance—deliverance from spiritual death as well as violent physical death.

Conclusion and benediction

It's a hard nut to crack... this false idea concerning the nature of true greatness and real power. It's a hard nut to crack... this false idea that greatness and power are to be used for personal advancement, even if by violent means. Notwithstanding his example and his instruction, Jesus is having a heck of a time getting through to his disciples. They cannot fathom a future in which Jesus' greatness and power fails him. They cannot fathom the idea that he would not exercise his greatness and power to protect and boost himself and his righteous goals. They anticipate the magnification of their own greatness and power and jockey for position in the anticipated kingdom of God. And they will not countenance any slight to Jesus Messianic glory, especially since any slight against him reflects upon them.

So it is that when a people already despised openly slights the Messiah, the disciples are ready to offer a demonstration of his and their greatness and power. This demonstration of greatness and power will come through the means that this world's great and powerful ones always utilize to demonstrate their greatness and power: coercive, destructive violence.

But Jesus knows and sees such demonstrations of greatness and power for what they are. They are of a different spirit than he. They are of the spirit of the devil. And he will not partake. The prince of this world may come, but it will find no home in Jesus. But as important as his rejection of the evil is, his adoption of the good is even more important. He not only refuses to destroy, he lives to save and deliver. So, he delivers the Samaritans from the common worldly response to slights and offenses and rejections. He delivers them from the violent intentions of his clueless disciples. But for Jesus, we might have had another Sodom and Gomorrah on our hands. As it is, Jesus abandons all grievance against the Samaritans and leaves them in peace, giving them another day.

Two millennia have passed since Jesus warned us and warned us and warned us again. For two millennia those who claim discipleship to Jesus have been reading the sacred texts that pass his warnings on to the latest generation. For two millennia they have rejected his counsel. For two millennia they have gone on in the satanic exercise of false greatness and power. For two millennia they have “raged” and “set themselves” “against the Lord, and against his anointed” through their vain pursuit and destructive use of false greatness and demonic power.

How many more days, do you suppose, do we have? How many more days will be granted leave to act upon Satan’s false ideas concerning the nature of true greatness and real power? How much longer before it catches up with us? How many more days before our continual and continuous resort to violent demonstrations of greatness and power finally comes boomeranging back upon us? For, make no mistake about it, it is not the wrath of God we should fear, but the wrath of humankind.

“Behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed.”¹⁰

Yes, it is God’s judgment, God’s decision, God’s choice that when the wicked suffer for their

¹⁰ Mormon 4.⁵

wickedness—and they do and will—the suffering will at their own hands and of their own doing rather than his, just as the law of restoration calls for.

Thanks be to God that standing outside a Samaritan village on a spring day, the Lord, Jesus resisted his disciples' wicked desire to punish those whom they perceived as wicked. Thanks be to God that he calmed the disciples' hearts and showed them the way of peace and salvation that his greatness and his power sought.

So, how am you doing in your 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.

*God hath spoken once;
twice have I heard this;
that power belongeth unto God.
Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy:
for thou renderest to every man according to his work.*"¹¹

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹¹ Psalm 62.¹¹⁻¹²

ⁱ 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)				