

“...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 2¹

“take up his cross”

matthew 16.²⁴⁻²⁶

²⁴Then said Jesus unto his disciples, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. ²⁵For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. ²⁶For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”

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

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

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.

Jesus offered demonstration after demonstration of his greatness and power. He did so through word and deed. In response to those demonstrations of greatness and power, and to Jesus' query, "Whom say ye that I am?" Peter offered his great apostolic confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."²

Sensing, I believe, in Peter's confession a misunderstanding concerning Jesus' Messiahship and the nature of his greatness and power, Jesus, as corrective to that misunderstanding, "from that time forth began... 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..."³

Jesus *was* great and powerful. But his greatness and power was to be observed from a different set of proofs than the world had taught the disciples to expect. Jesus' intuition about his disciples' misunderstanding was soon confirmed. Shocked by Jesus' unwelcome pronouncement of rejection, suffering, and death—a pronouncement that ran directly contrary to the apostles' expectations of any future with Jesus—Peter took Jesus to task and "began to rebuke him, saying, 'Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.'"⁴

Witnessing Peter's resistance to his pronouncement—a pronouncement that was at the very heart of Jesus' *raison d'être*—and perceiving all too well the inspiration for that resistance, Jesus offered his own rebuke in response to Peter's presumptuous apostolic rebuke.

"Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men."⁵

We might be surprised to find that the confession that "Jesus is the Christ"—a confession that Paul declared and modern "Christians" are fond of announcing "is made unto

² Matthew 16.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

³ Matthew 16.²¹

⁴ Matthew 16.²²

⁵ Matthew 16.²³

salvation”⁶—can have an ugly side. This confession, at first blush “blessed,” can, as did Peter’s, turn into ugly egotism. Worse, it can turn satanic. Under such circumstances, the confession warrants, not blessing, but rebuke. Thus, Jesus was under necessity of constantly fighting off this satanic intrusion into the true kingdom of God—an intrusion that inspired a false view of the nature of greatness and power and justified a satanic expression and exercise of greatness and power. Jesus began this battle immediately upon Peter’s confession.

“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.”⁷

In Jesus’ instruction that is found in today’s text, we witness Jesus’ continuing resistance to the egotistical and Satanic intrusion into the kingdom of God, with that intrusion’s false notions concerning the nature of true greatness and real power. Not only is Jesus’ greatness and power different than what the world, including his closest disciples, imagines it to be, but true greatness and real power also looks different as practiced in the life of those who would presume to be his disciples. The first pill is hard enough to swallow, as Peter demonstrates. The second is even more difficult still.

“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.”

Since this is the first of Jesus’ many attempts to clarify the nature of true greatness and real power as practiced by Jesus and disciples, we will take it slow and chop the pill into small little pieces.

⁶ See Romans 10.⁹⁻¹⁰

⁷ Matthew 16.²¹. Mark and Luke also report Jesus’ response to Peter’s confession, a response that drew the vociferous reply from Peter. See Mark 8.³¹⁻³² and Luke 9.²¹⁻²².

Īf any man will come after me

When we read Jesus' "if any man will..." we might think, first, in terms of tense, as if Jesus is speaking of something that looms in the future. But this "will" is not about the chronological unfolding of events. This "will" is as much home in the present as in the future. Jesus' "will," is about volition. Jesus is speaking here of human desire: "if any man *wants* to come after me..." or, "if anyone *desires* to follow me..." or, "if anyone *intends* to follow me."

So, right off the bat, Jesus goes rummaging around inside, demanding that his listeners and those who would later hear word of him consider inner desires, wishes, and wants. "What are your wishes? More specifically, what are your wishes visa-via me, Jesus? You have a choice. You can follow me or not. If you do not wish to follow me, then you can go do as you please. Live it up. But, 'if anyone wishes to follow me,'" says Jesus, "then you're committed. So, choose carefully."

"Well," we might wonder, "to what, exactly, are we committing when we choose to follow you, Jesus?"

Jesus does not long keep us waiting for an answer. And his answer is short and sweet.

Īet him deny himself

"If anyone wishes to follow me," Jesus says, they must "deny" themselves. The King James' "let," could sound as if we are let just a tad off the hook. We still might have a choice. Maybe we can "follow Jesus" but not "deny" ourselves. But the verb, "deny," is in the imperative: "deny yourself!" Our first choice to follow Jesus removes the second choice whether to deny or not to deny ourselves. Jesus is not mincing words here. Peter's confession/rebuke has made it clear to Jesus that mincing words will not get him or the community he envisions where they need and must be if individuals and societies are to be saved, improved, and exalted.

And what of this “deny”? What do we make of it? Can we just deny ourselves the occasional candy bar, Bud Light, sexual dalliance? Can we simply pinch a few pennies Jesus’ way? If only. The Greek word, *aparnéomai*, means “to reject, disown, or renounce claim to.” It can mean “to be faithless [to oneself].” The disciples must practice a form of self-denial in which they become unfaithful to all the false traditions with which this world had so thoroughly indoctrinated them. This unfaithfulness to long-held traditions will look to others and will even often feel like faithlessness to self. Disciples of Jesus can no longer lay claim to themselves or to their “wishes.” They do not belong to themselves. They belong to Jesus. And they belong to everyone else.

“Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”⁸

Having second thoughts, yet, about what you wish for? What you want? About committing yourself to following Jesus? Well, it is about to get worse. Jesus’ demand for self-denial is about to become clearer and yet more challenging.

Take up his cross, and follow me

“Imitation,” Oscar Wilde suggested, “is the sincerest form of flattery.” Jesus does not care to be flattered, but he is serious about his desire to be imitated. Imitating him is absolutely essential. He has already warned of his coming rejection, suffering, and death. He will now give a clue to both the character of his own self-denial and that which will be expected of those who follow him: “take up your cross in imitation of me.”

One can be sure that it wasn’t until after Jesus had taken up his own cross at Calvary that his disciples began to fully appreciate the significance and depth of Jesus’ admonition that a follower “take up his cross.” Nevertheless, one can be sure that they knew full well, even at that earlier time, about crucifixion. They knew all about the cross’ tortuous physical pain, the emotional humiliation of suffering the cross—a humiliation experienced by both the crucified and anyone associated with or related to the cross-bearing sufferer—and the

⁸ Philippians 2.⁴

haunting death inflicted by the cross.

Jesus' disciples could indeed appreciate, even then, the radical and offensive implications of Jesus' admonition. One must be prepared to suffer humiliation, extreme suffering, and even death in order to be true disciples of Jesus, and to be the kind of blessing to others that children of Abraham were called to be and that followers of Jesus were expected to be in spades.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.”⁹

It is little wonder, then, that Jesus would be under the necessity of repeating himself over and over again. “Prepare to die if you wish to live.”

Jesus' topsy-turvy loss-is-gain, gain-is-loss world

Of course, with Jesus' crucifixion, the nature of Jesus' own self-denial and the nature of the self-denial expected of disciples would become unmistakable. Equally unmistakable would be the nature of true greatness and real power. Loss as the world understood it, was gain. Gain, as the world understood it, was loss.

“For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”

This truly was “denial.” This giving of one's own life was the ultimate unfaithfulness to self. Yet, it was only such unfaithfulness that could lead to a life worth living. This was, indeed, a radical reversal of all that this world stands for.

Jesus came by this topsy-turvy world view honestly. If Peter and his brethren were caught

⁹ John 12.²⁴

flatfooted by Jesus' radical understanding of true greatness and real power, then they must have either never met or heard a word of what his Mother, Mary, had to say about him.

It is highly likely that before he heard of it from or witnessed it in the exemplary behavior of his Heavenly Father, Jesus saw and heard of the divine reversal while his mother held and bounced him on her knees. God had turned her world upside down, bringing exaltation where before only the prospects of lowliness could be seen. And, Mary sensed, her son's life would be devoted to all sorts of unexpected and otherworldly reversals.

Gabriel may have informed Mary of the glorious name she was to give her son. He may have informed her of Jesus' Divinity. He may have announced Jesus' kingship. But it was Mary's own personal encounter with God and her mother's intuition, that led her to understand just how radically her son, named, 'God Saves,' would exercise his godly power. His would be a topsy-turvy kingdom, indeed.

“He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”¹⁰

Jesus was nothing if not one who practiced what he, and, undoubtedly, his mother before him, preached. So, he spoke his unwelcome warning to his disciples: his Messiahship would bring personal rejection and a loss of life to himself. Mighty, he would be put down. His true might and power would be revealed in his death. Exalted, he would be brought low. Brought low, the nature of his exalted status would be manifest. Having lost all, he would gain all. But now, here, Jesus is applying the lessons he had learned from his Father and mother to any and every would-be disciple. If they chose to follow him, he would remake them into his image. They must prepare to lose all if they were to gain and find all that eternity had to

¹⁰ Luke 1.⁵¹⁻⁵³

offer.

If anyone is beginning to feel that Jesus' requirements for discipleship are outlandish, impossible even, well... we empathize. Apparently, Jesus wasn't kidding when he said, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."¹¹ This gate to life, running through self-denial and unfaithfulness to oneself up to and including willing and humiliating death as it does, is far narrower than we might have imagined. In fact, the baptismal "gate" looks like an open eight-lane freeway compared to this needle sized slit that gives entrance into the kingdom of God.

Conclusion and benediction

Jesus' many, varied, and constant miracles were a primary demonstration of his greatness and power. In witnessing Jesus' greatness and power, Jesus' disciples became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, and that, as Messiah, he could not and would not suffer any reversals or failures as the world reckoned them. Thus, when Jesus suggested that reversals in the form of rejection, suffering, and death were eminent, Peter, speaking no doubt for all, felt so confident as to presumptuously rebuke the man that he had just moments earlier named, "Messiah."

Observing that his disciples were unable or unwilling to grasp the true nature of his Messiahship and his otherworldly greatness and use of power, Jesus shifted gears. His ministry began to focus on clarifying the true nature of his own greatness and power. But his instruction went beyond his person use of greatness and power. He began to explain and demonstrate that those who would be his disciples would, themselves, be required to follow his example of true greatness and real power. They too would be required to take up their cross and suffer loss in order to bring gain, not only to themselves but to those around them.

All of this is intimidating. One can be excused for feeling dismayed and overwhelmed, as the disciples felt after Jesus' related announcement concerning the near impossibility of a rich

¹¹ Matthew 7.¹⁴

man entering the Kingdom of God: “Who, then, can be saved.” We can only trust Jesus’ assurance:

“With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.”¹²

But, however difficult, those who desire be disciples of Jesus cannot avoid the standard. It is, in fact, fair and appropriate to examine the world around us and judge those who claim to be Jesus’ disciples by this high standard. It is fair to call satanic those who openly oppose this standard, whether in word or deed. It is fair to call satanic any who themselves use, or any who justify others’ use of greatness and power for personal ends.

Perhaps, as we realize these truths, we might come to understand and appreciate Peter’s rebuke. Perhaps we might humbly confess not only that Jesus is the Christ but that we, like Peter, often stand as rebukers of Jesus as we speak and act contrary to his divine standard of true greatness and the exercise of power.

Today is as good a time as any to acknowledge, accept, and live Jesus’ revealed principles of true greatness and real power. It is as good a time as any to kneel in awe and wonder at the foot of Jesus’ cross—the seat of real greatness and true power—and commit ourselves to mounting that same cross. Then, and only then will we find ourselves, and gain a life that surpasses in unimaginable ways and to an unimaginable degree the pitiful life that this world lives and offers.

So, again, how are 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.

¹² See Matthew 19.²³⁻²⁶

*“O God, thou art my God;
early will I seek thee:
my soul thirsteth for thee,
my flesh longeth for thee
in a dry and thirsty land,
where no water is;
To see thy power and thy glory,
so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary.
Because thy lovingkindness is better than life,
my lips shall praise thee.
Thus will I bless thee while I live:
I will lift up my hands in thy name.
My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness;
and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips:
When I remember thee upon my bed,
and meditate on thee in the night watches.”¹³*

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

¹³ Psalm 63.¹⁻⁶

^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)				