

"THE FUTILITY OF THE 'GLORY STORY'"

I. Introduction

- A. It is striking that Luke has juxtaposed the revelation of Jesus's glory on the Mount of Transfiguration with the futility of the disciples' attempts at the foot of the same mountain to cast out the demon that was tormenting this boy.
1. This contrast offers us a helpful insight into what is happening in the four vignettes that make up this text.
 2. After being given a brief glimpse of glory up on the mountain, the disciples still had their heads up in the clouds when they came down.
 3. They were operating out of the mindset that one theologian refers to as the 'glory story.' [Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 5]
 4. The glory story is an outlook that expects God's work to be manifested in things that are powerful, successful, and attractive in the estimation of the world.
 5. The problem with the glory story is that it is in conflict with what God told the disciples to do when he spoke to them from the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration: to listen to Jesus.
 6. Those who embrace the glory story are not listening to Jesus, who says that we can only understand the way God's kingdom is coming into this world by looking through the lenses of a different story: the cross story.
- B. While this text consists of four distinct pericopes, I have chosen to deal with them as one unit in this sermon because they have a unifying theme, a theme that is made evident by the way Luke has arranged them.

1. The passage begins by telling us about the disciples' failed attempt to cast out a demon.
2. And then it ends by describing the disciples' response when they see someone outside their circle successfully casting out demons in Jesus's name.
3. As we study these verses this morning, we will see how the futility of the glory story is exposed in this series of interactions between Jesus and his disciples.

II. A Surprising Failure

- A. The passage begins by describing a surprising failure on the part of the disciples, along with Jesus's response to that failure.
 1. Luke tells us that when Jesus and the three disciples who witnessed the transfiguration came down from the mountain, a man among the crowd approached Jesus and told him about the sad plight of his son, who was being afflicted by an evil spirit.
 2. The demon would frequently come upon the boy and convulse him so violently that he foamed at the mouth.
 3. And while the man had asked the disciples to cast the demon out, they had not been able to do so.
 4. This failure must have come as a surprise to the disciples, since Jesus had given them power and authority over demons before sending them out to minister in his name back at the beginning of chapter 9.
 5. What went wrong?
 6. Why was this evil spirit so intractable for the disciples when they had previously been able to perform exorcisms?

- B. We find the answer by looking at the broader context here in Luke 9 and at the parallel accounts in the other Gospels.
1. It is surely significant that this episode is so closely followed by the account of the disciples' argument about which one of them was the greatest.
 2. This suggests that they may have been relying on their own credentials rather than on Jesus when they tried to cast out this demon.
 3. This is confirmed by the fact that in the versions in Matthew and Mark Jesus tells the disciples that the reason why they could not cast out this demon was because they had little faith and because of their failure to pray.
 4. It seems they had gotten so caught up in the glorious nature of the ministry in which they were engaged that they lost sight of the One who makes that ministry effective.
 5. This stands as a warning to us today, reminding us that we need to continue looking to Jesus as we run the race that has been marked out for us in this life.
 6. You will never reach the point when you can get along by your own strength or on the merit of your past accomplishments.
 7. As Christians, we are always called to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, because he is both the author and the finisher of our faith.
- C. Jesus responds to the man's report of the disciples' failure by saying, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?"
1. This might seem like a cry of impatient frustration, but that could not have been the case because Jesus was without sin.
 2. Instead, this recalls the words of rebuke issued to Israel in this part of the song of Moses, recorded in Deuteronomy 32: "The Rock, his

work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation.”

3. Moses rebukes Israel for their covenant unfaithfulness by calling them a twisted generation.
 4. This tells us that Jesus is rebuking his disciples and the crowds for their failure of faith.
 5. Just as God’s mighty deeds in the days of Moses were met by unbelief on the part of the people, so also were Jesus’s mighty deeds being met by unbelief.
 6. Jesus’s words of rebuke here stand as a warning against persisting in unbelief in the face of all that he has done to secure the redemption of his people.
- D. After this initial exclamation, Jesus then commands the man to bring the boy to him.
1. Here we see a wonderful picture of our Lord’s patience and compassion.
 2. Though he is disappointed by this failure of faith, he is not going to leave the child in this state of torment.
 3. We should note that Mark’s version adds that the boy had suffered from this condition from early on in his childhood.
 4. From a purely human point of view, this was a hopeless case.
 5. Nevertheless, the demon proved to be no match for Jesus.
 6. This reminds us that there is no problem that is too difficult for our Lord to handle.

III. A Concealed Saying

- A. As the people are marveling at how Jesus's power over the demonic realm revealed the majesty of God, Jesus seizes the opportunity to talk once again of his coming death.
 - 1. He begins by reiterating what God had just said from the cloud about carefully listening to him, saying, "Let these words sink into your ears."
 - 2. The disciples needed to see that Jesus's popularity was not going to last.
 - 3. He was going to be betrayed and handed over to death.
 - 4. Jesus knows that this most recent exorcism will get the disciples thinking along the lines of the glory story again.
 - 5. But he wants them to understand that that is not the story that they are in.
 - 6. They are in the cross story, and so are we.
- B. Luke tells us that the disciples did not understand Jesus's saying.
 - 1. While they heard Jesus's words, they did not see how his being handed over to death could possibly fit in with God's plan.
 - 2. As Peter had recently confessed on the disciples' behalf, Jesus is the Christ of God, the Messiah.
 - 3. The Messiah was supposed to subdue the nations under his feet, not be subdued by them.
 - 4. The disciples could not understand this because it was concealed from them.

5. They would understand later, but at that point in time they were still in the dark.
6. This serves as a good example of the fact that we cannot gain a spiritual comprehension of the Word of God unless and until God grants it to us.

IV. A Revealing Argument

- A. The next vignette in our passage involves a revealing argument that arose among the disciples, an argument concerning which one of them was the greatest.
 1. We are not told how this dispute arose.
 2. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that Peter, James, and John witnessed the transfiguration while the others did not.
 3. Whatever the case, the disciples were probably not using the term “the greatest” as they argued about this.
 4. It is more likely that they were a bit more subtle than that.
 5. Yet Jesus knows the reasoning of their hearts.
 6. He sees the source of this disharmony.
 7. The root of their argument was the prideful assumption of each man that he was better than the others.
 8. This is a thought that dwells deep within each of our hearts.
 9. We compare ourselves against others, and we conclude that we are more important, or more successful, or more virtuous, or superior in some other way.
 10. This is what was behind the disciples’ argument.

- B. Note how this mindset stands in sharp contrast to what Jesus just said about himself in the previous paragraph.
1. He was about to be delivered into the hands of men, men who would subject him to a disgraceful death.
 2. As Paul writes in Philippians 2, though Jesus was in the form of God, he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”
- C. Jesus responds to the disciples’ argument by taking a child and setting him at his side.
1. Then he says, “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.”
 2. To get a sense of the shock value of those words, we need to understand how children were viewed in that culture.
 3. It was considered a waste of time for a pious man to pay significant attention to children.
 4. Consider these words from one rabbinic text: “Morning sleep, midday wine, chattering with children, and tarrying in places where the common people assemble, destroy a man.” [m`Abot 3.11]
 5. Jesus obviously did not share that view.
 6. Instead, he taught his disciples that all people count, even those who are unimportant according to a culture’s prevailing attitudes.
 7. Moreover, Jesus wanted his disciples to see that the way to greatness is not to engage in the comparison game.

8. In the end, those who try to establish their status by garnering the approval of others will see their precious status fade into oblivion.
9. Christ calls his followers to rest in the fact that in him we already have God's approval.
10. This sets us free from using other people as leverage to bolster our own standing.
11. Because we are secure in Christ, we can extend a gracious welcome to anyone whom the Lord brings across our path.

V. A Mistaken Assessment

- A. We come now to the last pericope in our text, where we see the disciples making a mistaken assessment.
 1. They see this man casting out demons in Jesus's name, but they tell him to stop because he does not belong to their circle.
 2. Notice the wording that John uses when he speaks to Jesus about this.
 3. He says, "we tried to stop him because he does not follow with us."
 4. It is not that the man was not following Jesus.
 5. After all, he was successfully casting out demons in Jesus's name.
 6. No, the disciples were concerned with the fact that this man was not one of them.
- B. Jesus responds to John by saying, "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you."
 1. Now, it is interesting that Jesus says almost the exact opposite of this in Luke 11:23: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

2. As you might imagine, this gets a lot of attention from biblical scholars who don't believe that the Bible is the Word of God.
 3. They will contend that this is a contradiction and that it therefore proves that the Bible is merely a human book.
 4. Such arguments are proven to be without any basis when we simply look at the contexts in which Jesus says these things.
 5. In chapter 11, Jesus is making a different point.
 6. He is saying that there cannot be any neutrality in the spiritual conflict between Christ and Satan.
 7. You are either on one side or the other.
- C. Here in chapter 9, Jesus is rebuking the disciples for thinking of themselves in such an exclusive way.
1. While it is true that they had a unique office as apostles, there were others in the apostolic era who were given the ability to heal and cast out demons and speak with prophetic authority.
 2. The disciples' response to this man revealed that they were afraid that his success would end up diminishing the importance of their ministry.
 3. They were thinking of their calling as a matter of status and privilege rather than of service.
 4. Perhaps this was the reason why Jesus chose to work through this other man, this outsider, to continue his assault on Satan's kingdom.
 5. The disciples needed to see that the office to which Jesus had called them was not about privilege and power but about proclaiming Christ and furthering his kingdom.

6. Remember the reason why the disciples were not able to cast out the demon earlier in this passage.
 7. They were unable to cast it out because they were relying upon their own strength instead of the power of God.
 8. The fact that this man was able to cast out demons meant that he was doing it by faith and by prayer.
 9. The work that he was doing was not his work but the work of God through him.
 10. While he had not had the benefit of being with Jesus to the extent that the disciples had been, he was clearly not against Jesus.
- D. This portion of our text reminds us that there is a unity in Christ's church that transcends the particular groups into which it is arranged.
1. Now, this does not mean that the doctrinal differences between these groups are of no importance.
 2. On the contrary, some doctrines are of such great importance that there can be no true church if they are abandoned.
 3. And even the doctrines that are not at the vitals of the Christian faith are important because they are dealing with things that God has revealed in his Word.
 4. We should not label anything that God has revealed to us as a "non-essential."
 5. At the same time, we do need to guard against the mistake that the disciples made when they rebuked this man who was casting out demons in Jesus's name.
 6. We need to remember that there are genuine followers of Christ who are not in our particular circle.

7. To lose sight of this is to fall prey to the notion that the kingdom has arrived in its consummated state.
8. It is another example of how we can be ensnared by the glory story.

VI. Conclusion

- A. There are many ways that we can be attracted to the glory story.
- B. It seems that it is always morphing into some new program or taking shape in various ways in our own hearts.
- C. The way to fend it off is to keep our eyes fixed upon our Savior.
- D. He alone possesses all glory in himself.
- E. He is the One through whom the worlds were brought into existence.
- F. Yet for our sake he took the form of a servant.
- G. He suffered the indignity of death on a cross so that we could have a right standing with God and rejoice in the hope of glory.
- H. We are not in the glory story; we are in the cross story, being conformed to the likeness of our crucified and risen Savior.
- I. That being the case, far be it from us to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.