**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THREE FAULTS OF JESUS FOLLOWERS**

**Luke 9:37-50**

**INTRODUCTION**

Earlier this week Nina and I went out for a date at the McDonald's over at Yonge and King. Finding time for regular dates has always been a challenge for us. Sometimes we can go months between going out without any kids. That's one of the reasons why attending the Sovereign Grace Pastors' Conference last week was so special. We were able to enjoy one another's company all week as we took in this wonderful conference together.

So when I told Nina we were going on a date merely four days after we returned from the conference, she looked at me in shock and asked, "It's time for a date already? Aren't you tired of me yet?"

One of the things I look forward to during our dates is having Nina speak into my life. We all have blindspots, especially when it comes to how we are doing personally. So I asked her, how does she think I’m doing as a father, as a husband, and as a pastor? How does she think I’m doing spiritually?

My wife is incredibly gracious. She is patient, she is gentle, and she is long suffering. And yet, when I asked her these questions, I felt myself holding my breath. I was anxious about what she was about to say. I knew that any correction she had for me would be done gently, but that didn’t make it easier.

Correction is never easy to receive. In fact, the Bible says that it takes a special kind of person to receive correction. Proverbs 12:15 says,

“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”

We often think that those who are wise are good at *giving* advice, and that’s true, but we must not forget that those who are wise are also good at *receiving* advice. It takes wisdom to give godly correction, and it takes wisdom to receive correction in a godly way. If you don’t receive correction in a godly way, it’s because you’re not a wise person.

In our text today, Jesus has some strong correction for his disciples. Though he was speaking to disciples living in the 1st century, I believe that his correction applies just as much to his disciples living in the 21st century. If you are a follower of Christ, Jesus has correction for you today, and in order for you to receive it well, you need to become a wise person.

I know how easy it is to listen to correction and say to yourself, “He doesn’t understand me”, or “He has the facts wrong.” It’s even easier to listen to correction contained in a sermon and say, “That may apply to others, but it certainly doesn’t apply to me.” All this may be true. It may not apply to you. But the difference between wise people and foolish people is that the wise don’t presume innocence. They presume guilt, because they know their sin, and they know their desperate need for the help of their Saviour.

The title of this message is **Three Faults of Jesus Followers**. My aim today is to show you that **Listening to Jesus Reorients Our Lives When We Start to Lose Our Way.** We will look at three things today:

1. Doubt
2. Ignorance
3. Rivalry

(1) **DOUBT**

Our text today begins immediately after Jesus came down from the mount of transfiguration. There, Jesus revealed a glimpse of his true glory to Peter, James, and John, as his face shone like the sun and his clothing became dazzling white, proving that he didn’t just possess the authority of God. He also possessed the glory of God.

As the three apostles stood in awe at the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, a cloud came and overshadowed them, causing them to tremble in fear. From that cloud, God the Father declared about God the Son that, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” In this declaration, God confirmed that Jesus was in fact the prophesied Messiah, the Saviour King who had come into the world to redeem a people for God, and therefore everyone had to believe and obey everything that he said. After God spoke, Jesus closed the curtains to conceal his glory once again, and everything appeared to be back to normal.

Except everything wasn’t back to normal. Peter, James, and John had just seen the glory of God with their own eyes, and they had heard the voice of God with their own ears. For a few brief moments, their faith had turned to sight.

So as Jesus descends from the mount of transfiguration in verse 37, they might have expected Jesus to change the way he related to the crowds. They might have expected him to say, “The days of listening to your requests are over, and the days of listening to me have come.”

But that isn’t what Jesus does. He comes down from the mountain ready to serve others once again. Darrell Bock puts it this way:

“Jesus came not to glory in the mountaintop experience, but to touch the needs of people and heal their pain.” (p. 880)

Jesus may possess divine glory, so that it’s right to worship him, and he may possess divine authority, so that it is right to obey everything that he says, but he also possesses something else: divine compassion. He is ready, and always will be ready, to “touch the needs of people and heal their pain.”

Luke tells us that there was a man in significant pain crying out from the crowd for help in verse 38: “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. 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.”

Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has demonstrated his absolute authority over all demonic forces. He had no trouble whatsoever casting out evil spirits. It didn’t matter if there was a single demon or a thousand of them. All of them trembled in fear at his presence and fled when he gave the command.

But there is something different about this exorcism narrative, and we see it in verse 40, where the suffering father says, “And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” How could that be? Jesus never had *any* trouble whatsoever with demonic forces. His authority was absolute, and he had passed on that same authority to his disciples earlier in Chapter 9. How could the disciples have failed?

Jesus reveals the problem in his rebuke in verse 41: “O *faithless* and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?” We know that Jesus doesn’t get exasperated about much. He can put up with a lot of sin. But if one thing frustrates him about people, it’s lack of faith. Jesus gets frustrated when God’s people doubt God’s power to accomplish God’s plans.

The same is true for us. Jesus doesn’t say, “O faithless and twisted disciples”, or “O faithless and twisted crowds”. He says “O faithless and twisted *generation*.” We are included in this rebuke, because the same sin that led them to doubt is the same sin that causes us to doubt.

And what did this doubt produce? It produced *failure*. The disciples weren’t able to do what God wanted to do through them because of their lack of faith.

When we’re serving God and we’re failing, it can be so easy to say, “Well, I guess it wasn’t God’s will.” That’s not what Jesus says here in response to the disciples’ failure to cast out the demon. He doesn’t say, “The demon didn’t come out because it wasn’t God’s will”. He says “The demon didn’t come out because of your *lack of faith*.”

We believe that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign over all things. Everything happens according to his will. He does what he wants, when he wants, and nothing can ultimately frustrate his plans. The doctrine of God’s sovereignty is a precious truth that we would do well to appeal to often.

But sometimes, we can abuse the doctrine of God’s sovereignty and use it as an excuse for our failings. We pray for someone to come to Christ and it doesn’t happen, and we tell ourselves, “It wasn’t God’s will,” when in fact it was our own lack of faith. We set out to reach out to our community and we don’t see any fruit, and we tell ourselves, “It wasn’t God’s will”, when in fact it was our own lack of faith.

We know that results don’t depend on us. We water and plant, but God gives the growth. But what we often forget is that, sometimes, our lack of faith prevented the watering and planting from happening in the first place.

Jon Bloom over at Desiring God puts it this way:

Of course, not every unanswered prayer for healing, provision, conversion, etc. is a result of little faith. But we must not let ourselves off the hook too quickly when we don’t see prayers answered or when our ministry efforts fail. Being a Calvinist doesn’t mean we always get to appeal to God’s mysterious inscrutability. Yes, God is sovereign. And in this narrative, the sovereign God makes a clear statement: Little faith results in ministry failure. (Article from November 13, 2015).

We often treat doubt as if it is a purely internal issue, when in fact it is an external issue as well. Doubt doesn’t just lead us to struggle with our own beliefs. Doubt leads us to struggle in our capacity to serve others. Lack of faith makes us less effective as God’s instruments to accomplish God’s plans.

This is the first correction that Jesus has for us today. Jesus wants to correct us for our doubt, because when we doubt, we’re not just hurting our relationship with God. We’re hurting our relationships with other people.

But here’s the good news. Jesus heals the boy even though the disciples couldn’t. Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit in verse 42, heals the boy, and gives him back to his father. Our doubts may frustrate Jesus, but they cannot frustrate his plans. Our doubts can’t limit what Jesus can do. We see that over and over again in Luke’s Gospel. The disciples doubted Jesus’ ability to save them in the midst of the great storm on the sea of Galilee, but that didn’t stop Jesus from rebuking the wind and the waves. Jairus and his relatives doubted Jesus’ ability to bring his little girl back to life, but that didn’t stop Jesus from raising her from the dead.

Jesus wants us to have faith, not so that he can do more, but so that he can do more through us.

So if you’re lacking faith today, don’t despair. Hope in the one who acts despite our lack of faith. And when you see him meet you in our weakness, he will strengthen your faith as well.

(2) **IGNORANCE**

If doubt were the only fault that believers struggled with, life would be hard enough. The fight against lack of faith is one that will last a lifetime. Sadly, it's not the only fault we have. Ignorance is just as prevalent, and just as dangerous. This leads to our second point: the fault of ignorance.

At the time, it may have seemed like the whole world was being won over by Jesus. Twice in verse 43, Luke emphasizes that *all* were astonished at Jesus, and *all* were marveling at everything he was doing. But in the midst of all this immense popularity, Jesus brings his disciples back down to reality with this sobering prediction: "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men." Jesus and his disciples may have been enjoying the favour of the crowds for a moment, but very soon, those same crowds would deliver Jesus up to suffer and die at the hands of men.

This isn't the first time Jesus predicted his suffering and death. Earlier in Chapter 9, right after Peter declared that Jesus was the Christ of God, Jesus told his disciples that he was about to suffer many things and be rejected and killed (9:22). Here, Jesus tells them about this once again, except this time he prefaces it with the command in verse 44: "Let these words sink into your ears".

Jesus is saying “Listen carefully to what I’m about to say, and don’t forget it. Remember this, expect this, and believe this.” But what are the disciples of Christ to listen to and believe? To the news that Jesus was about to be delivered into the hands of men.

This was the most important part of Jesus’ message, because it was the most important part of his ministry. Jesus lived in order to die, so that he might save sinners like you and me. He would be betrayed so that we could be accepted. He would be punished so that we could be forgiven. He would die so that we could live. These are the words that all who follow Jesus and trust in him must listen to and believe.

But the disciples didn't listen. Luke tells us in verse 45 that, "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."

When Luke says that "they did not understand this saying", he's not saying that they didn't understand his words. It's not as if, all of a sudden, they could only hear gibberish coming from Jesus' mouth. Their problem wasn't with *comprehension*. Their problem was with *understanding*. They didn't understand how Jesus, God's Chosen One, who had absolute authority over sin, Satan, and death, could ever be delivered to suffer and die at the hands of men.

The answer of course is that Jesus went willingly to his suffering and death. Men were only able to deliver him over to suffer and die because Jesus first delivered himself into their hands. No one can take the Son of God’s life from him. Only he could lay it down of his own accord.

But the disciples didn't understand this, and this lack of understanding had two causes. The first was an external cause. Luke says that "it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it." Something is concealing true understanding from them. Luke doesn't tell us what it is, but a fair assumption is that it is Satan. Jesus wouldn't tell them to let these words sink into their ears, and then withhold understanding from them. Satan, on the other hand, is the great deceiver. He lies to us, so that we don't believe the words of God. Indeed, earlier in Chapter 8, Jesus describes Satan as a bird that swoops into our hearts to snatch away the seed of the Word of God, so that we never come to believe it.

The second cause was an internal cause. Satan may have been concealing true understanding from them, but at the same time, the disciples had no desire to *un*conceal this understanding. Luke says that, "They were afraid to ask him about this saying." They were aware that they didn't understand, but rather than ask Jesus to teach them what he meant, they chose instead to avoid the topic altogether.

This is the second fault of Jesus followers. It's ignorance. More accurately, it's *deliberate* ignorance. It's the kind of ignorance that is self-imposed, because you would rather not know the truth. I called this "willful blindness" in a previous sermon. To be willfully blind or deliberately ignorant is to be aware of the need for inquiry, but to decline to make the inquiry because you don't want to know the truth.

The disciples should have made further inquiry about the news that Jesus would be delivered into the hands of men but they didn’t. Why was this so important? Because understanding the suffering Jesus was about to experience was the only way that they could understand the suffering that they would experience as well. A student is not greater than his teacher. If the teacher suffers, than his students must suffer as well.

Have you ever been willfully blind when it comes to God's words regarding the suffering that Christ followers are to endure? We encounter this again and again in the Scriptures:

“All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12)

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (John 15:18-19)

“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three.” (Luke 12:51-52)

We read these words, and yet we’re surprised when the culture around us mocks and denounces us for our beliefs. We read these words, and yet we’re not prepared when families break apart for the sake of the gospel. Why are we surprised? Because we haven’t let the words about Jesus’ suffering and our suffering *sink into our ears*. We read words like these and we’re troubled by them, but rather than receive them and believe them, we continue on with life as if we never read them. Just like the disciples, we can be guilty of merely listening with comprehension and not with understanding.

That’s not what listening to Jesus looks like. That’s not what letting his words *sink into our ears* looks like. We can’t read the Scriptures like we read a magazine, picking and choosing what we like and discarding the rest. We need to give careful attention to *every single word* of the Scriptures and see them as absolutely, unequivocally true.

How do we know if we are letting Jesus’ words sink into our ears and not living in deliberate ignorance? Let me give you three signs of Scripture-filled ears:

1. Regular Bible Reading. The words of Jesus can’t sink into your ears if they’re not reaching your ears in the first place. The most basic mark of someone who is truly listening to Jesus is regular, consistent Bible reading. I don’t think it means that you have to read the Bible every day. As the father of young children I know how difficult that can be. But I do think that, when Bible reading is not happening every day, you’re aware of it and you make plans to do something about it.
2. Praying the Scriptures. Many of us treat Scripture and prayer as if they are two separate things. We read the Bible, and then we pray or vice versa. What we’re supposed to do is pray *as we read the Bible*. Prayer isn’t done in isolation from the Word. Prayer is meant to be informed, guided, and shaped by the Word. This is so important. Prayer is an intensely personal way of relating to God, and when we pray the Scriptures, we make the Scriptures intensely personal to us as well.
3. Listening to Expository Preaching. Generally speaking, there are two ways that the Scriptures can be preached: topically, or expositionally. A topical sermon is where the preacher chooses a topic, and then finds verses in the Bible to speak to that topic. An expository sermon is where the preacher chooses a text, and then finds the topics from that text. There’s nothing inherently wrong with topical sermons. They can be very helpful. But the danger of topical sermons is that the Bible can become a mere footnote to what the preacher wants to say, and a church ends up letting his words sink into their ears rather than God’s words. Expository preaching guards us from that, because its central objective is to understand and apply God’s Word and not the words of men. This is the kind of preaching we endeavor to practice at our church. It’s the reason why, over and over again, I’m pointing you to the text so that you can see that the point I’m making is the point God is making in his Word. This is absolutely essential to truly listening to Jesus and letting his words sink into our ears, because without it, it becomes all too easy to listen to men.

 (3) **RIVALRY**

Lest we become proud about the fact that we have expository preaching and other churches don’t, Jesus has one more correction for us today in our text, leading to our third point: the failure of rivalry.

Luke gives us some insight into why the disciples weren’t willing to ask Jesus about his prediction about his death. They were too busy talking about how great they were! Verse 46 says, “An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.”

I must admit that verse 46 seems a little comical at first. There’s nothing quite like a bunch of adults arguing back and forth about how great they are in comparison to one another. Can you imagine the conversations they would have been having amongst themselves? One of the apostles might say, “I cast out ten demons the other day, so I’m going to get a greater reward in heaven than all you losers.” “So what?” John might say, “Jesus chose to take *me* up the mountain to see him transfigured, not you!” Then Peter would chime in and say, “You’re both wrong. Obviously, I’m the greatest. After all, God chose *me* to identify Jesus as the Messiah.”

This type of conversation seems quite foreign to us. As good Canadians, we’re too modest for this kind of vain discussion. In fact, we’re so modest that we prefer not to speak about ourselves at all, let alone speak about how much greater we are than others. But though we may not talk about such things, we must admit that we *think* about such things.

How do I know this? I know because of what the Bible says about sinful, fallen human nature. The heart of sin is pride, and the heart of pride is rivalry. Pride is inherently comparative. It was pride that made Adam and Eve sin by eating the forbidden fruit. They chose to do what they wanted to do rather than submit to what God wanted them to do. But do you remember the lie that Satan used to successfully tempt them to sin? “When you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God*.” Adam and Eve didn’t just eat the fruit because they thought it would make them wise. They ate the fruit because they thought it would make them wise like God.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

“Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone.” (Mere Christianity)

Sin makes us proud people, and pride makes us comparative people. Whether it’s our beauty, our intelligence, our accomplishments, or even our godliness, we’re always comparing ourselves to others. We don’t just want to be smart. We want to be smarter than others. We don’t just want to be great. We want to be greater than others.

That’s why we shouldn’t look at a text like this and chuckle. We should look at a text like this and see ourselves. We may not argue about who is the greatest with others, but we certainly argue about who is the greatest in our own minds.

Jesus corrects our thinking in verses 47-48: “Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, ‘Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For the one who is least among you all is the one who is great.”

What’s Jesus saying here? He’s saying that true greatness comes not from knowing how much better you are than others, but from knowing Jesus. Even a child who knows Jesus can be counted great, because that child can be a representative of God himself. We see that in verse 48: “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” Receiving a child can mean receiving God, because children can become the very representatives of God through their relationship with Jesus. What an incredible, unparalleled honour, to represent God himself! There is no greater honour than to represent God, and this honour is what makes someone great. This is why even the least among us, including children, can be great.

This means that we have nothing to boast about in ourselves. We don’t boast about our accomplishments. We don’t boast about our talents. We don’t boast about anything in ourselves through what we say to others, or what we say to ourselves. We boast of Christ, and Christ alone, because Christ is the one who makes us great. It doesn’t matter if you haven’t accomplished much by the world’s standards, and it doesn’t matter if you don’t have many strengths according to the world’s standards. Jesus makes the least among us great. If you know Christ, then you are great through your knowledge of him.

This radically changes the way we think about other people. No longer do we measure others by who they are or what they have done. We measure them by whether they know Christ. This is the ultimate standard for measuring greatness. If they know Christ, they are great. It doesn’t matter if they’re poor, or they’re young, or they’re not very smart or attractive. Those things have nothing to do with true greatness. People become great when Christ, the greatest one, gives them his greatness.

This radically changes how we act towards other people as well. Scripture tells us to “outdo one another in showing honour” (Romans 12:10), but we don’t often do this. Why? Because we want others to honour us. We don’t want to speak about the accomplishments and strengths of others. We want others to speak about ours. But if true greatness comes from knowing Christ, then we lose our desire to have others honour us, and we grow in our desire to honour others instead.

There’s one more kind of rivalry we need to guard ourselves against, and we see it in verse 49, where John says, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.” The first kind of rivalry was personal rivalry, where people compare themselves with others. This second kind of rivalry is group rivalry, where a group of people compare themselves with others.

It can be just as easy for us to fall into group rivalry, especially for a theologically-minded church like ours. We have strong convictions about what the Christian life should look like and how church should be done, and I am glad for those convictions. I believe that they are biblical convictions, and that they are good for our personal spiritual health and for our corporate spiritual health. But what we must avoid is thinking that we have a monopoly on what God is doing in the world. We don’t. God is doing *much* in the world outside of our church, outside of our family of churches, and even outside of the broader Reformed movement. If someone is not against us – meaning that they stand with us on the essentials of the Christian faith – then they are for us. And if they are for us, then our impulse should be to celebrate what they’re doing and not stop them.

We need to be theological without being theological snobs. Indeed, if our theology should do anything for us, it should make us humbler people, not proud. And if we are humble people, then we won’t focus on how much greater we are than others. Instead, we will focus on how great others are because of their faith in Christ.

**CONCLUSION**

God declared on the mount of transfiguration that we must listen to Jesus, and the words Jesus wants us to listen to today are words of correction. Jesus has correction for all of us today. You may struggle with one of these faults, or you may struggle with all of them. It doesn’t matter. The question is, how are you going to respond? Will you listen to Jesus’ correction? Will you sit down this week with God and ask him to work in your heart, so that you your doubts will be replaced with faith, ignorance with understanding, and rivalry with humility? Or will you go on as if nothing has changed?

Jesus brings us correction not because he is angry with us, but because he loves us. For those who believe that they are made right with God through the death of Jesus for their sins, nothing can take away his love for you. So let us receive this correction well and come to God with full assurance that he will both forgive and free us from our sins.