

Mark 10:23-31

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Glory and Cross

The Word of the Lord from Mark 10:27: "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The disciples don't know what to say. So far, everything has been going so well. But now in Mark 10, there's a little chill in the air. A man has just asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life; and rather than stay and rejoice, the man has walked away in sorrow. As he disappears into the distance, Jesus turns to His disciples and says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." This simply doesn't compute for the disciples, because it seems they have bought into what we'd call a theology of glory.

A theology of glory teaches that God is at work where you see glorious things going on – and consequently, God is not at work where you don't see glorious things going on.

In the case of the disciples, they've seen Jesus heal the sick, feed multitudes and calm storms. They've seen Him cast out demons. They've watched the crowds grow and grow. Peter, James and John have just seen Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop – they were scared out of their minds, but it was certainly glorious! When Jesus is doing things like this, it's easy to point and say, "This is God at work!" because it's the sort of stuff that they expect God to do.

On the other hand, remember that Jesus has already told them that He's going to be betrayed and killed: He's told them that the cross is coming, and how have they responded? They don't understand. They can't make sense out of it. A crucifixion isn't glorious: it's a gruesome, shameful death that is anything but glorious. At this point in the story, when the disciples try to imagine Christ crucified, they can't. It doesn't fit a theology of glory: they can't look at a dying, bloodied man on a cross and say, "Truly this man is the Son of God."

When the disciples look at the man who has just talked to Jesus, they see a law-abiding citizen who has abundant wealth. Wealth is glorious to the eyes – it's much more glorious than poverty, yes? Therefore, theologians of glory like the disciples look at this rich young man and say, "Clearly, God loves this guy more than most *because* he's got a lot of stuff." Elsewhere, remember, they'll look at a man born blind and essentially ask Jesus, "What did he do to make God so angry with him? Or was it something his parents did?" (John 9:2)

And now as the man walks away sorrowful, Jesus says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples are amazed, because they think God must love the rich more than the poor, the strong more than the weak, and the healthy more than the sick. Thus, they ask, "Then who can be saved?" In other words, "If the glorious people that God obviously loves (like this guy) can't get into heaven, who can?"

Jesus responds, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." It's true: all things are possible with God, but God does things His way; and God's ways do not always look glorious – not as sinners define it.

In stark contrast to a theology of glory is the theology of the cross. Where a theology of glory says, "God is at work where I see glorious things," the theology of the cross says, "God is work where He says He is, even if it doesn't look glorious at all."

When a theologian of glory preaches on the life of Jesus, he focuses on the wonders and the miracles and says, "Look what Jesus can do! And if you only have enough faith, then maybe He'll work wonders for you!" When a theologian of the cross preaches on the life of Jesus, the sermon goes in this direction: "How remarkable that the holy Son of God, who can work all sorts of powerful wonders, saves you – not by those great miracles, but by dying in your place on the cross." See, you're not saved because Jesus made the blind see and the deaf hear. You're saved because Jesus died for you.

When a theologian of glory preaches on the teachings of Jesus, he focuses on the law and says, "The more you do these things and keep these commandments, the more gloriously God will bless your life!" When a theologian of the cross preaches on the teachings of Jesus, the sermon goes more like this: "It's absolutely true that keeping God's law is a good thing to do, but thanks be to God that Jesus died for all the times you don't." You're not saved by keeping the law, even though that's a great thing. You're saved because Jesus died for you.

When a theologian of glory looks at the church, he'll conclude that a stadium-sized church with thousands is far more blessed by God than a rural parish with an average attendance of 38. A theologian of the cross will say, "What makes a church blessed, no matter the size, is that the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and the sacraments are administered according to the Lord's institution, because that's what God says." Speaking of the means of grace, a theologian of glory will conclude that a church with worship designed to stimulate emotions is a blessed one because people leave feeling energized, while a theologian of the cross will point to the Lord's Word and Sacraments because that's where people get forgiven.

A theologian of glory will make a big deal whenever a pop musician, celebrity, star athlete or politician says something vaguely Christian, because they have a platform to reach large audiences. A theologian of the cross won't object, but he'll note that it's just as God-pleasing, if not more so, when a stay-at-home mom reads a Bible story to her kids before nap-time. (In God's eyes, that's glorious!)

A theologian of glory will say, "I preach about Jesus, but talking about His death doesn't appeal, so I focus on other things and refer to forgiveness now and then." A theologian of the cross will say with St. Paul, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ *and Him crucified*" (1 Co. 2:2).

I'll gladly concede that a theology of glory is more glamorous, exciting, emotionally stimulating and popular. However, a theology of the cross is in keeping with the Word of God; for God maintains that salvation is yours because Christ died for you, that the Church is called to preach the forgiveness of sins, and that the forgiveness of sins is given out in the means of grace.

By nature though, like the disciples, we're all theologians of glory.

It's true in the text: when Jesus says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!", He's actually not singling out the rich. He's warning everyone about a theology of glory. See, those with wealth are tempted to say, "My riches prove that God must favor me, so what do I need with repentance?" But it's equally tempting for the poor to say, "My poverty proves that God must hate me, so what do I want with this God?" It's the same bad theology that drives both conclusions. So when Jesus says that it's hard for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven, His point is that *anyone* who believes that God loves the rich more than the poor is going to have a tough time getting in.

You'll be tempted to be a theologian of glory at the worst possible times. It hides while life cooks along as usual, but then something bad happens – something that shakes your faith: sickness or injury,

the death of a loved one, loss of employment, destruction of property, or something else. Whatever it is, it comes as a gut punch that sends you reeling and saying, "Why would God let this happen to me?" Or, "What have I done to deserve this?" That's the theologian of glory talking, and it starts talking before you know it; and it's driving you toward these questions: "If my life isn't very glorious, then does God still love me? And if I see only trouble and nothing glorious happening, then where is God for me?"

Let us answer those questions because, while your life may never be glorious, it's inevitable that it will have trouble. I say that to say this: if your faith is currently gasping for breath because of some trouble, you need to have the right answer. If your faith is currently not under such trial, now is the best time to prepare. Sooner or later, the big one you face is death, and there is no glory in death and dying.

Whether or not your life is glorious, how do you know that God loves you? You know that He loves you because He became flesh and shed His blood for you. He bore all your sins and guilt and shame, along with your weaknesses and infirmities, to the cross. He suffered for all of your unrighteousness, in your place, there. His most glorious moment in history is His crucifixion; because although it looks anything but glorious, that's where He wins the victory, sets you free and conquers sin, death and devil. How do you know that God loves you? Because greater love has no one than this, than to lay down his life for his friends; and yet, while we were still enemies, Christ died for us! In love, Jesus laid down His life for you. Then He rose again to keep pouring out His steadfast love upon you. *That's* how you know God loves you.

Whether or not your life is glorious, where is God for you? Exactly where He promises to be. He's in His Word. In that Word, He gently reminds you to beware of a theology of glory that looks for His help in all the wrong places, and He tells you realistically that you should not be surprised when life has its share of suffering. But far more importantly, He speaks to give forgiveness – and because you are forgiven, you're confident of God's love even when life argues that He's out to get you. He speaks to strengthen the faith that He gave you when you were baptized, and He reminds you that you are blessed because you believe even though you've not seen Him. He speaks to give you strength and hope, to remind you of His promise that He will deliver you, and to remind you that He is with you in these times of suffering.

He *is* present, so much that He gives you His body and blood to forgive your sins, and to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting – to strengthen and keep you in the faith throughout all the nastiness of this life.

You can be sure that God loves you because Christ has died for you. You can be sure that He is with you because He keeps speaking to you, keeps feeding you Himself. That's hard to believe: apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, it's impossible. But isn't that what Jesus says? "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." And God has done the impossible of delivering you from sin and death to life everlasting.

Hold on, my friends: the Lord is faithful. "Who can be saved?", ask the disciples. The answer is you can. You are. Because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen