### “The Power of Glory” Steve Finlan for The First Church, March 16, 2025

**Philippians 3:20–4:1**

20But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. 4:1Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

**Luke 9:51–56**

51When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. 54When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’ 55But he turned and rebuked them. 56Then they went on to another village.

The Philippians passage is one of the places where Paul speaks about our future spiritual body. Imagine what it will be like when “he will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory,” that is, Jesus’ resurrected glory (3:21). Can you imagine a new body, bright with spiritual light that we receive from Jesus? Another point he makes there is that Jesus will make all things subject to himself, by spiritual power. It’s spiritual power that I want to talk about today.

In the story from Luke, James and John fail to recognize spiritual power, and want Jesus to use miraculous power to burn up some Samaritans who weren’t receptive to him, apparently because he had his mind set on Jerusalem. The apostles misconceive spiritual power as having a *material* (and even *murderous*!) effect. How could they get it so wrong? How could they harbor such petty vengeance in their hearts? Maybe it’s still early enough in Jesus’ ministry that the apostles haven’t had time to learn very deeply about Jesus’ values, his non-violence, and the *spiritual* nature of his power. Often the gospels point out the short-sightedness of the apostles, perhaps to let us know we are not alone in being slow to comprehend.

But Jesus has already told them, in the immediately preceding chapters of Luke, to love their enemies, to be merciful, to not judge (Luke 6:35–37). He healed a Roman soldier’s servant, and praised the soldier’s faith (Luke 7:8–10). He taught them that his real mother and brothers are those who “hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21). He told them that the least among them shall be the greatest (Luke 9:48). But they don’t seem to have yet learned and internalized these messages of mercy, humility, tolerance, and non-violence. They are amazed by Jesus, but their thinking has not yet been much *changed* by his message. Jesus has patience with them as he does with each of us, as we learn about spiritual truth.

Let’s look for a moment at those events in Luke’s gospel precedingtoday’s story, and see how they should have changed the apostles’ thinking. The command to love one’s enemies is undoubtedly a difficult message. And it might go against one’s instincts to follow the next pair of commands: to be merciful and to not judge (Luke 6:36–37). To follow these commands would be to take on the attitude of a great and patient parent who understands that the children have a lot of growing up to do, and has more mercy and pity than judgmentalism toward backwards and sinful humans. That would be a big change in one’s thinking. We can each be our brother’s keeper and offer up our patience and understanding to one another, as we know Jesus offers to us.

Then comes the lesson that should have diminished their nationalism, when he heals a Roman’s servant and tells the Roman he has not seen such faith in all of Israel as he sees in him (Luke 7:9). The apostles had not yet incorporated the message that even a Gentile could have great faith, possibly greater than anyone in Israel has. It’s just too contrary to the patriotic feelings that they have grown up with.

Next comes the story where Jesus mildly rebukes his own family for wanting to interrupt his preaching, and says that his real mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. This shows that spiritual loyalties are more important even than family ties.

And finally there is the lesson about being humble like a child, and making oneself the servant of others. This is a love message that doesn’t come easily to the mind of a grownup who has seen human selfishness and sneakiness. These are anti-cynical messages that go against what people have experienced. How can you voluntarily make yourself the least among your brethren? How can you love your enemies, who may take advantage of your kindness? How can you trust a Roman? How can you rank someone who follows your teachings above someone who is related to you by blood? Admittedly, Jesus’ message can be hard to internalize. It takes a very sharpened spiritual sensitivity to detect the faithfulness of a Roman. It takes a service-based value system to see the value of making oneself the least, and of praying for one’s enemies.

But if James and John had by then fully internalized Jesus’ service-ethic, they would not have requested that fire be called down from heaven. If they had learned to be tolerant of other ethnic groups, they would not have been so ready to see Samaritans be killed. They had not yet learned very much of the spiritual power that the remarkably humble man, Jesus, possessed.

In fact, at this point in the story, they knew little of spiritual power itself, which is never power *over* others, but only seeks to *empower* others. They placed themselves above the Samaritans and judged them unworthy of anything but fire from heaven. A feeling of moral superiority is sometimes what motivates the worst cruelty. James’s and John’s hearts had strayed from the right way.

The Confucian sage, Mencius, said “Sad it is indeed when a man gives up the right road instead of following it and allows his heart to stray without enough sense to go after it. When his chickens and dogs stray, he has sense enough to go after them, but not when his heart strays. The sole concern of learning is to go after this strayed heart” (Mencius VI. A. 11 [Penguin classics, p. 167]). I think Mencius would have liked Jesus, who came three hundred years after Mencius.

Jesus’ spiritual power will some day make all people subject to his glory (Phil 3:21), which really means his *values*, and not by might or coercion or threats or punishments, but by the persuasive and attractive power of love. Jesus will some day persuade the human race to try out this different way of living. Of course, we are so far from it now. Bullies still seek to impose their will, and bullying nations seek to impose their will, too. This needs to be repudiated. We must stand against bullying. Bullying has so often dominated society, that we sometimes assume that it is normal, but it is *not* normal. We are to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves, not violent as sharks or competitive as dogs in a dog-eat-dog world. We can create whatever kind of society we want, really. We can create a world where kindness dominates, where we follow God’s will because we desire goodness and spiritual light. Let not your heart stray; let love be *your* world’s foundation.

We will be utterly changed if we take on an attitude of highly spiritual parental love, if we desire to empower and serve others, have tolerance towards other races and nations, and focus on spiritual growth. Being a disciple of Jesus means being changed in deep and lasting ways. And there is more transformation to come, when “he will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory” (Phil 3:21). And all of this is yours for the asking. Seek and you will find!