

August 30, 2026 – Matthew 16:21-28

Martin Luther once said that there are two fundamentally different ways of understanding God and the Christian life. He called one a theology of glory and the other a theology of the cross.

A theologian of glory expects to find God in the things of this world that look powerful, successful, beautiful, and victorious. In the glories of this world. While, in contrast, a theologian of the cross finds God where He has actually chosen to reveal Himself: in suffering. In the cross.

That's a distinction that has been lost by a great many churches and Christians in the world today. Particularly in the United States. But it's a distinction that we really, really need to learn. Because it completely reshapes how you read scripture. And our Gospel lesson for today just happens to be one of the core scripture passages that Luther pointed to in defining the theology of the cross. So it's a great opportunity to dive into the topic.

But we could probably use a bit of context before we start unpacking this passage. Just before our text, Peter had made one of the greatest confessions in Scripture. Jesus asked His disciples, *"Who do you say that I am?"* Peter answered, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* And, of course, Peter was absolutely right. And Jesus praised his confession and said that Peter had received this knowledge from the Father.

But what Peter didn't understand was what kind of Christ He had come to be. Matthew tells us, *"From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things ... and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* Jesus must suffer. He must die. And He must rise again.

Peter can't accept that. *"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."* Peter wants the Christ, but he doesn't want the cross. He wants the kingdom of God, but not the suffering of God's servants. He wants Easter, without Good Friday.

And really who can blame him? Who wants a Messiah who suffers? Who wants to follow a King who is arrested, beaten, mocked, and crucified? Who wants a Savior who dies?

But Jesus' answer is a harsh rebuke: *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me."* Peter's words are not simply mistaken. They are a temptation, just like the ones Satan previously used in the wilderness. Peter is tempting Jesus away from the very purpose for which He came. *"You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*

And that is the theology of glory. It thinks as human beings naturally think. Strength is better than weakness. Success is better than failure. Pleasure is better than pain. Life is better than death. Victory is better than defeat.

And so, the theology of glory assumes that we can look at outward appearances and determine exactly where God is at work. If things are going well, God must be blessing me. If I am healthy, prosperous, and successful, surely God is pleased. But if I suffer, if I fail, if my plans collapse, if life becomes painful, well that must mean that God has abandoned me.

The cross destroys that way of thinking. Look at Good Friday. Everything appears to have gone wrong. Jesus has been rejected by His own people. The Messiah has been condemned as a criminal. His disciples have scattered. His enemies are celebrating. And the Son of God hangs dying on a cross.

If we judged God's work by appearances alone, we would conclude that Good Friday was the greatest failure in all of history. But we know that it wasn't. It was God's greatest victory.

There, through the suffering and death of His Son, God was reconciling the world to Himself. There, Jesus was bearing the sins of the world. There, death itself was being defeated by death.

The theologian of glory looks at the cross and says, “This cannot possibly be victory.” The theologian of the cross knows that this apparent defeat is God's victory. This suffering is the price of our redemption. This crucified Jesus is the Savior of the world.

And this means that the cross does something else that we don't particularly like. It calls us what we actually are. Because we want Christianity to leave us unchanged. We want forgiveness without repentance. We want resurrection without dying. We want Christ to save us, but we're not always interested in following Him.

So Jesus says to Peter and to us, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*” And to follow Christ is to deny ourselves.

And that's really, really difficult because the old Adam is a theologian of glory. He wants to be at the center. Just as the serpent tempted in the Garden of Eden, the old Adam wants to decide good and evil for himself. And, ultimately, receive the glory that comes from becoming like God.

But Jesus says, no. “*Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*” The life we're desperately trying to preserve apart from Christ isn't really life. Because every day of our lives, we're already dying. And the whole world can't save us.

“*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*” That's the question the theologian of glory doesn't want to ask. What if you get everything you want? What if your career succeeds, your plans prosper, your life is filled with good things, and you gain the whole world? What then? “*What shall a man give in return for his soul?*” Nothing.

Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind me.” And that's precisely where Peter belongs. Not in front of Jesus, telling Him where He's permitted to go. Behind Jesus. Following Him.

That's where we belong as well. We don't tell Jesus what kind of Savior He supposed to be. We don't choose a path for Him that avoids suffering while promising glory. We get behind Him. We follow where he goes. We walk the path he takes us on.

Sometimes that path leads through joy, through prosperity, through success. And we thank God when it does. But sometimes it leads through sickness, rejection, grief, sacrifice, suffering.

When it does, the theologian of glory says, “God can't possibly be here.” But the theologian of the cross simply looks to Jesus. Because in Christ, there is God.

There He is, suffering for sinners. There He is, dying for His enemies. There He is, so very weak and yet conquering death. There He is, hidden beneath shame and yet revealing His glory. There He promises to be with us always, to the end of the age.

The theologian of glory asks, “How can I avoid the cross?” The theologian of the cross asks, “Where is Christ?” Because wherever Christ is, there is life. Even in suffering. Even in death.

Because the story doesn't end with the cross. Jesus told His disciples that He must suffer, be killed, and “*on the third day be raised.*” Peter didn't want the suffering, but he also didn't understand that suffering and resurrection go together. Hand in hand.

The cross isn't the end. Resurrection is. And the resurrection does lead to glory. The Son of Man who was rejected will come again “*in the glory of his Father with his angels.*” The One who hung condemned will judge the world. The One who was mocked will be acknowledged by every knee.

Glory is coming. But it comes in God's way, not ours. Through the cross comes resurrection. Through death comes life. And so Jesus says to us what He said to Peter: Get behind me. Follow me. Amen.