Two Dangers, One Saviour
John 12:37-50

If I were to ask you, 'is getting what you want a good thing?' Your knee jerk reaction would probably be 'yeh, I mean, who wouldn't want to get what they want? Surely getting what you want and achieving your goals, and attaining your dreams is one of *the* markers of success in life.'

But you'd also want to nuance that a bit wouldn't you? I mean, should a parent always give their child what they want? Would it be good for them always to have what they want? It might actually be the very worse thing that could happen to them.

But is it so different for adults? I mean, you can think of people for whom getting what they want would be a very bad thing, and not just for them.

But then think of yourself, and some of what you want. Like those desires that can motivate a lot of what we do. Like that desire to be well thought of, or well liked, or whose jokes everyone laughs at; or well respected; or better known and better positioned - and climbing up the ladder of social or academic standing.

Or think of those desires you might have for the good things of life, like comfort and pleasure, or wealth and the ability to travel, or having a great circle of friends.

Is getting those things a good thing? Well, it depends, doesn't it. But what today's passage tells us is that sometimes getting what you want doesn't just damage you, it can destroy you. And as a result you need saving from yourself. So we're going to look at two things, firstly, two dangers - two dangers of getting what you want, and secondly one saviour.

Two Dangers
Look at v37, 'Though he [that's Jesus] had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.' And Jesus has entered Jerusalem, with the crowd welcoming him, but now they're questioning him: 'what kind of a king, what kind of a messiah are you? Because you're not saying the kind of things we want you to say.' While the religious elite have dismissed him.

And John's saying that failure to believe Jesus and to trust him, was despite the fact that 'he had done *so many signs* before them.' And think of those signs. Water turned into wine at a wedding feast; sellers of sacrificial animals cast out of the temple; a paralysed man healed on the Sabbath; 5000 people fed from virtually nothing; the disciples in a boat in a storm and Jesus walks to them on water; a blind man's sight restored; and a 4-day dead man raised to life - just by Jesus calling him out of the tomb.

And John's saying they should have seen all that and believed. They should have seen that and realised he's the one who's come to make those great stone water jars and the need for ritual cleansing obsolete, that he's the true master of the feast; they should have seen that he's the one come to end all sacrifice because he's the ultimate sacrifice; that he can heal on the sabbath because he's the Lord of the Sabbath; that he fed those people because he's the true bread from heaven; that he walks on water because he's as the Lord of nature; he restores sight to the blind because he's the light of the world; and he raised the dead because he is the resurrection and the life.

But they didn't believe, John says, and they're morally responsible for their failure.

And yet… haven't you got to ask, 'yes, but why didn't they believe?' I mean, if Jesus was so impressive, why didn't they get it?

And that's not just a matter of historical or intellectual interest. It matters because of what John writes next.

Verse 38, they did not believe in him, '*So that* the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"'

And John's quoting from Isaiah 53, that incredible passage that speaks of how the Servant of the Lord will suffer and die. But this crowd doesn't want that kind of a Servant of the Lord. They want one who's mighty and victorious, who's going to crush their enemies with power.

And John's saying, the reason they're not believing in Jesus is to fulfil what Isaiah said, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" And the answer - not these people.

But then John goes further. Verses 39-40: 'Therefore *they could not* believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened they heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them."'

Hang on John, are you saying that the reason these people can't see Jesus for who he is because God blinds them? That the reason they can't believe is because God hardens them?!" What kind of a God is that?

Well, what if it's a God who gives you what you want? But not as an indulgent parent.

You see, in this second quote John is quoting from Isaiah 6. And Isaiah experiences this earth-shaking and heart-melting encounter with God in the temple. 'In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:1-5)

And God commissions Isaiah to be his mouthpiece to the people of Israel. But as he does, he's blunt: They won't listen to you, Isaiah. In fact, what you say will deaden their hearts, and block their ears, and blind their eyes.

But to understand why, you've got to go back to Isaiah 5. Because there God lays out his charge sheet against Israel. And instead of pursuing relationship with God and all that would make for human flourishing, they've pursued wealth - oh yeh, let's build bigger and better houses; and they've pursued pleasure and entertainment - hey how much can you drink?! And in the public square they've called evil good, and darkness light. While in the courts they're letting the guilty go free while the innocent are deprived of justice.

And God is saying, ‘They’ve closed their hearts to me; they’ve turned their backs on me, and if that's what they want well, then you can have it.’

Now, imagine you are throwing a special party and there’s going to be a feast, and music and dancing, and you invite all your friends. But one gets the invite and goes ‘why would I want to do that?’ And they send a reply saying, ‘thanks but no thanks, I’ve got better things to do with my time.’ What are you supposed to do with them? You might try and persuade them to come mightn’t you. But after a while you’d say, ‘Ok, have it your way, you don’t want to share the joy and hear the music and join the dancing. So stay outside if that's where you’d rather be.’

And that’s **Danger no 1**. of getting what you want - *you’re given over* to what you want, and **your heart becomes hard**. And in Romans 1, Paul argues that humanity has exchanged the glory of God for created things, and the truth for a lie, and served the creature rather than the Creator. And in response, God says ‘Ok, you want unlimited sexual freedom, you want all that money and power can give you, you want to decide for yourself what’s right and wrong, well, if that’s what you really want, you can have it and let's see how it goes. Let's see what life is like when your prayer is ‘my will be done and my kingdom come.’’

Because what you find is you drift further and further away from the good and what really makes for your life and the life of those around you to thrive. But like being on the deck of a boat leaving the port, the further you move away, the less you see and the less you hear that life could be different.

And that was true in Isaiah’s day. And John is saying it’s true in Jesus’ day. In insisting on having things their way they had lost the ability to see Jesus for who he really was.

So how about you? What do you really want? And would getting it be good? Or would you find your heart hardening to the things that really matter, like love for God and love for neighbour? And if you’re not yet a Christian, is what you’re wanting from life drawing you to the good and the true, or pushing you away?

Ok, but **Danger no. 2:** is **moral compromise.**

Verses 42-43, ‘Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.’

A couple of weeks ago Su and I were skiing, and following a school ski party of 11 years olds or something down the piste. And as they were going down the boy at the back had the most spectacular crash, with skis and poles and arms and legs everywhere. And we watched as he got to his knees and held his head in his hands, not moving. And I thought, ‘ooo, that doesn’t look great.’

But the rest of the class, except for one helper at the back, were gone. So we skied up and the boy was sobbing, with blood on his face, and so I said to the helper, ‘we’re two doctors, can we help?’ And she went, ‘oh, thank you, two doctors, angels from heaven, yes of course, please’ so I checked him over and he had a small cut on his face, and another in his mouth, and a big fat lip but was basically ok. And so we patched him up, stopped the bleeding, and said, you’ll be fine, your lip will look like a car tyre by the morning, take some brufen and you’re good to go.’ And the helper was

like ‘o thank you, thank you, would you like to stay with us for the whole week?’ And off we skied, like heroes.

And over lunch we texted our family WhatsApp group, and said ‘you’ll never guess what happened to us today’ and recounted the story. To which one of our girls replied, ‘Dad, did you tell them that actually you’re a pastor and mum’s a secretary.’ Er, no. Did you tell them that you haven’t actually practiced medicine for nearly 20 years?’ Er, No. ‘And did you tell them that when you did practice you were of no use to man nor beast unless they weighed less than 500g?’ ‘Er, no I didn’t, no.’

Why not? For the same reason why for years after becoming a pastor and someone asked me what I did I’d reply, ‘I’m a pastor, *but I used to be a doctor!*’ Because what people think of me matters too much to me. And when it comes to social capital, a doctor is up there, but a pastor is lower than a basement toilet.

But when what people think of you does matter too much, when what you really want is to be liked, or approved of, you’ll compromise the truth and you’ll compromise yourself.

And John’s saying that’s exactly what was happening with these religious authorities who believe in Jesus, but didn’t have the courage to admit it. And the reason they didn’t was down to whose glory they wanted. Verse 43 again, ‘they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.’

Now, one definition of sin is that it’s a turning in on ourselves. And rather than love God and neighbour, we love ourselves. Rather than seek the glory of God and the good of others, we want the glory coming our way, and the good is what’s good for me, ‘what’s in it for me?’

But that desire to be well thought of, to be admired, to be respected, can be so subtle can’t it? And if you’re a leader, like these men were, isn’t it good that your fellow leaders think well of you? Sure, but when that becomes the most important thing to you, you’ll start screening what you tell them. You’ll tell them your successes, but not your failures, your strengths but not your weaknesses. And when it comes to faith, in a space where faith is contested, the pleasing murmur of the approval of others will cause you to be quiet about your faith.

And John’s just quoted from Isaiah 53 and the Servant of the Lord who suffers. But were they willing to suffer alongside the Suffering Servant? Were they willing to pay the price of being looked down on, or locked out of the synagogue?

In his essay, *the Inner Ring*, CS Lewis describes what the desire to be on the inside of a group can do to a person. It could be some friendship circle, or a sports team. It could be the upper levels of management or the in crowd on campus. Whatever it is, you want to be in. And Lewis says, ‘Of all the passions [of all the things you most want in life], the passion for the Inner Ring is most skilful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.’ And he goes on, ‘The quest of the Inner Ring will break your heart unless you break it.’

And for these men, to be counted among the leaders, those upstanding few in the synagogue was their Inner Ring. But what is it for you? Whose glory, whose approval, whose acceptance do you most want? Look for that in others and as Lewis says, and John shows, it will put you in danger of not doing or saying what you should, and saying and doing what you shouldn’t.

Great, you might say, but how can we get what we most want *right*? How can our hearts be softened to want the good, to want God and his ways? And how can his approval mean more to us than that of others, when that of others seems so much more real?

One Saviour

At the start of their journey in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and his friends make it to the Prancing Pony inn at Bree, where Frodo first meets Strider - who also happens to be Aragorn, the rightful heir to the throne of men. But you wouldn't believe it by looking at him. But Gandalf has left a letter for Frodo telling him to trust Strider. And in it there's a poem, that begins, 'All that is gold does not glitter.'

In other words, this man who looks anything but royal, is the king before whom all men will bow.

So look at v44, 'And Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me."' Now just as an aside, Jesus cannot just be a good teacher, can he? Because let what he's saying sink in. Firstly, he's saying that God has sent him. And in v49 he makes that explicit: "The Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment - what to say and what to speak."

But secondly, he's saying that 'when you look upon me, Jesus, you are looking upon God. When you trust me, and believe in me, you're trusting and believing in God.' What kind of a man says stuff like that? The same man who said back in chapter 10, "I and the Father are one" (10:30).

But look at him. There's nothing god-like or glittering about him, is there? He's just a carpenter. A manual labourer. Exactly, John says. As Isaiah said, 'Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men… and we esteemed him not' (Is 53:1-3).

And John is saying, Jesus is that Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. The One of whom Isaiah goes on to say, 'he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities' (Is 53:4). And there's nothing glittering about him, because there's nothing glittering about the cross. And yet, John says, come and see the gold, because all that is gold does not glitter, and when you see Jesus for who he *really* is, you've seen the Father.

Look at again at v41. John's just quoted Isaiah 6, where Isaiah sees the Lord high and lifted up, and his glory filling the temple. And then John says, 'Isaiah said these things because he saw *his [Jesus's]* glory and spoke of him.'

So, Jesus isn't just the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, he's YHWH, he's the Lord, high and lifted, if Isaiah 6, the one whom angels fall before in worship. But this crowd and these leaders are blinded to his glory, because they want something else more.

But when you do see his glory, that's when what you most want in life begins to change. Because you'll begin to see that Christ, the Lord of glory, set aside his glory, and the one from the highest position left his position, and the one with the greatest reputation became of no reputation, and the

one with infinite wealth and comfort became poor. Why? To rescue you from your wrong desires for glory, and position, and reputation, and comfort and wealth. From the very things that destroy our lives. And as you see more clearly what he gave up for you, you'll love him more dearly, and want what he wants.

And that won't just be good for you. Because as you see him humbling himself for you, you'll humble yourself for others and serve them. As Jesus says in v46, "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness."

Now, are there consequences for turning your back on Christ and pursuing what you most want? Sure. Hardened hearts and moral compromise. And in v48 Jesus is clear that whoever rejects him will face future judgement. And yet he also makes clear, v47, "If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; *for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world*." In other words, as Don Carson writes, 'Jesus has not come for condemnation but transformation.'

Not to condemn you, but to save you - from yourself and from getting what you most want. And instead, to lead you into the approval and praise of God. Live for the approval of man and it will slowly destroy you. But know that in Jesus you are already approved of by God and that's when you really start living. As Jesus says of the Father in v50, "I know that his commandment is eternal life."

So, this week, reflect on what you most want in life, on whose glory you're after, on what the Inner Ring is for you. And then see Christ giving up his place of honour, and laying aside his glory, and stepping out of the ultimate Ring for you. And daily choose him over everything else.