

Sermon Series: “Good News for Life”
“The Allure of Synthetic Glory”
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Can you tell the real from the fake? The pure from the impure? The genuine from the synthetic, even counterfeit? We should note there that the word “synthetic” means, according to my American Heritage Dictionary, “not natural or genuine; artificial”. E.g., there are times when Elena and I go out to eat and she gets a Diet Coke and I would get a Coke, and we could not tell by looking at the glass which was which. So the only way to know, for me, is to taste it. So I did, and I could always tell the real Coke from the fake Coke, the genuine Coke from the synthetic Coke— by the artificial sweetener in the Diet Coke. And whenever I taste Diet Coke, I don’t like it at all. I find it has an after-taste, and it always leaves me feeling unfulfilled. In fact, given the choice between Diet Coke and water, I will choose water! Perhaps you are like that too. Now this is not a criticism of those of you who like Diet Coke. I am aware there are people who like Diet Coke a lot, and drink it all day long. But such is not the case for me, and many other people with whom I have spoken. When we happen to have Coke, we prefer the real deal— with all the sugar! And I would imagine that those who drink Diet Coke would prefer a Coke except they cannot have all the calories. And it is like that in many areas of life, we prefer the real, not the fake; the genuine, not the synthetic. That goes for clothes as well. E.g., I recall years ago J.C. Penny came out with a knit, polo-type shirt to compete with the Izod “Alligator” shirts. J.C. Penny made a shirt that had just as good quality shirts, but less expensive— and also did not have an alligator on the front, but a fox! Eventually, the fox shirts did not sell very well. People wanted the real designer shirt which was popular, not the less expensive substitute. Jesus likes that too with regard to people’s faith, as we’ll see in today’s passage.

READ John 12:36b-43 (p. 107)

CONTEXT: Jesus has just spoken to the crowd following Him that they should walk in the light— Himself— not the darkness. They are to believe in the light— Himself— so that they can become children of light.

READ vv 36b-37. “Jesus retreated temporarily away from the crowd. And that crowd, which had greeted Him enthusiastically as He entered Jerusalem (vv 12-19), became fickle! Cf. 6:14-15,60-67.” We live in an age of fickleness. Think of all the past fads we have had over the last 50 years in music: folk music, acid rock, disco music, punk music, grunge music, hip hop, and rap music. Billy Joel may say, “Hey, it’s all rock n’ roll to me”, but there are some significant differences in this music. We also see this in interest in spiritual things. We recall that after 9/11 in 2002 there was an upsurge in people attending church and interest in spiritual things. According to Pew research from 2019: “More than eight-in-ten members of the Silent Generation (those born between 1928 and 1945) describe themselves as Christians (84%), as do three-quarters of Baby Boomers (76%). In stark contrast, only half of Millennials (49%) [born between 1981-1996] describe themselves as Christians; four-in-ten are religious ‘nones,’ and one-in-ten Millennials identify with non-Christian faiths” (quoted from N. Gingrich, *Trump and the American Future*, pp. 283-284). The times they are a’chang’in, as Bob Dylan sang, and people’s fickleness in spiritual things change as well. Jesus knew about this. READ 2:23-25. In John 6:14-15 the people want to make Jesus a king because He fed the 5,000 in the wilderness, and then later in that chapter the people are offended by Jesus’ teaching as the bread of life and they abandon Him. Such fickleness was apparent in Jesus’ day, and in ours unfortunately.

READ v 38. “The evangelist quoted from two texts in Isaiah The first from 53:1, which introduces the Suffering Servant who was despised and rejected (v 3) and yet bore the sin of many. Cf. Mark 10:45.” The phrase that he bore the sin of many is in Isaiah 53:12. Jesus’ rejection was anticipated in Isaiah 53, a text which tells that Jesus was the One to take away their sins. Jesus refers to Isaiah 53 in Mark 10:45; READ. Here the author of this gospel, John, wants to reveal the tragedy of this scene. Jesus comes to His people, and they reject Him and don’t believe in Him. Have you ever seen someone reject the help and good wishes of another? E.g., I recall one of the greatest tragedies of a wasted career in the NFL, at least to me; back in 1970 the Dallas Cowboys had a rookie running back named Duane Thomas, who had a reputation in college as being a brilliant running back but difficult person with whom to get along. He ended up getting Rookie of the Year in 1970, and then wanted to renegotiate his three-year contract, but the Cowboys did not want to re-negotiate, so Thomas sat out the beginning of camp, was traded, came back to the Cowboys because the other team couldn’t get along with him, and he played the 1971 season for the Cowboys, the year they won the Super Bowl against the Miami Dolphins at Tulane Stadium. But that whole season long he talked to no teammate or the media. He never really played football after that, and one of his ex-teammates said what a wasted career, because he could surely have been in the Hall of Fame— he compared him to Jim Brown. People reached out to him to help him and befriend him, but he was bitter and difficult to get along with. That is what the people are like with Jesus. He wants to help them, He is the one who will take their sins, but they don’t trust Him, but despise and reject Him.

READ vv 39-41. “The second Isaiah text comes from 6:10 where the Lord asks, ‘Whom shall I send?’ to a people of rebellious heart, a people the Lord only wanted to heal! Cf. Romans 5:8.” Some people are like that with the gospel. E.g., I recall talking to a friend about the Lord but he was consistently skeptical;

so I asked him, if I could satisfy his doubts and provide evidence that strongly shows Jesus rose from the dead and the gospel message is true, would he become a Christian, and he said no.

READ vv 42-43. “Despite the rejection of Jesus by others, many of those in authority believed in Jesus but did not dare voice this, because they were enticed by synthetic glory instead of that which is genuine.” The glory of God referenced here is the glory Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6:1-5; READ. We are comparing here the synthetic, counterfeit glory compared to the real deal. Have you ever really been interested in something or someone to where it was almost an obsession, and then later to think, why was I so interested in that? E.g., I recall when I was a child my sister Carolyn and I were fighting over a dabloon, and I was insistent that it was mine. So my Dad, clearly tired of our bickering, told us to pick a number basically to see who would get it. I picked a number and Carolyn did, and she won— and I was furious and cried! Years later I looked at those dabloons I treasured so much and thought, “Why were these silly things so important to me?” I could see the counterfeit, synthetic glory they held to things that were really important in life. That is the way it is when we chose to please others instead of God. Have you ever been with a group of people whom you wanted to please so much that the idea of Jesus’ will in your life was completely ignored? E.g., I recall working with youth once when I was just out of seminary, and I wanted them to like me and they liked me, and I would joke with them and it was fun— and I realized how empty, synthetic that glory was, because it was all about me and me fitting in, not about Jesus. E.g., as a minister in The UMC I have often had to choose whether to please my colleagues who are different theologically or to honor God by what I say and preach, and God has a lot of work to do with me because I can see a lot of “people pleaser” in me. What does God’s glory in someone’s life look like? E.g., I recall Audio Adrenaline’s 1997 “Chevette” which describes it well. The lyrics say, “Twenty year ago, I watched in awe/as my

Dad drove up the driveway/more than proud to have a brand new family car/Thirty miles to the gallon, 0 to 60 sometimes/I remember putting down the backseat/and lying in the hatchback/Looking at the sky watching the trees go by/I was the son of a preacher/and he was a rich poor man”. And the chorus goes, “No AC and no FM/and no regrets/in my Chevette, yeah/in my Chevette, yeah.” The next line goes, “The winter cracked the highway/and we tried to dodge the potholes/he never promised us it would be a gentle ride/He never had a problem though/keeping it on the narrow road”. And again, “No AC and no FM/and no regrets/in my Chevette, yeah/in my Chevette, yeah”.

“What kind of glory do you and I prefer?” Do we prefer that others like us and to be popular? Or do we prefer to please the Lord and honor Him, no matter the cost? We see the religious leaders desired human applause, and that is an easy mistake to make. So let’s go before the Lord this week with this question on our hearts: what kind of glory do I prefer, they synthetic, counterfeit or the real deal?