

The Greatest in the Kingdom of God
Luke 9:46-62
Key Verse: 9:48

"Then he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all--he is the greatest.'"

"Who would be the greatest?" That burning question was on the hearts of Jesus' disciples in this passage. It was such a hot issue that they began to argue with each other about it. Jesus did not dismiss them for their childishness. Instead, he taught the paradoxical nature of true greatness. We all want to be great. A person, made in God's image, must be great, as God is great. God told Abraham, "I will make your name great." God wants to make his children great. We should not be petty; we should be great! But how can we be great? The way to true greatness is hidden from sinful man. Those who try to make themselves great often end up grieving God and damaging others like King Saul. However, there is a way. We can learn from Jesus how to be truly great. Then we can please God and be really happy. Through this passage, Jesus teaches us how to be truly great in four ways.

First, welcome a little child in Jesus' name (46-48). Look at verse 46. "An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest." Several factors may have contributed to the outbreak of this argument. When Jesus was transfigured in glory, he took only Peter, John and James with him. These three must have felt privileged, trusted, and affirmed as leaders. But the nine disciples who were left behind felt that they were becoming second class. Then, when they failed to drive out the demon, they fell into a sense of failure. As they listened to Jesus predict his betrayal, each one felt desperate to prove himself. They sensed the need to take decisive action to put themselves forward. It was urgent; the kingdom seemed to be upon them. Under this pressure, their inner hearts were revealed. They began to make their cases one by one. Maybe Matthew went first, chirping that he would be the greatest because he had changed most from evil to good, and was the best writer. John may have challenged this, saying that he would be the greatest, for he had quietly absorbed Jesus' teachings, and could synthesize them better than anyone. Annoyed with these intellectuals, Andrew may have claimed that he was the greatest, for he knew Jesus' heart and took action instead of just thinking and talking. Then, to everyone's surprise, Bartholomew spoke up. Though he had been obscure, he boldly claimed that a hidden greatness in him would emerge and amaze everyone. As Peter listened, he was shocked, then became angry. Was it not clear that Jesus made him leader of the twelve? In this way, tempers began to flare and an argument broke out among them. We can understand them. Sometimes we want to write the best testimony or teach the most Bible students or have the best children, or even the best pets. A sense of competition can make us hard-hearted, people with plastic smiles.

When we study the gospel books carefully, it seems that Jesus had a clear order among the disciples in his own mind. However, Jesus did not try to impose a leadership structure on them. Instead he taught them a principle that would help all of them struggle. A structure would not help them, but Jesus' words would help them to grow in their inner men. In teaching them, Jesus could have drowned out their argument with his voice like rushing waters. Instead Jesus used a visual aid. He took a little child and had him stand beside him. This must have made the disciples stop and think. In that society, children were usually disregarded. So this little child must have suddenly felt very special. All of the disciples were looking at him. Most of all, Jesus was talking about him. The child must have smiled from ear to ear. This unusual scene intrigued them. Then the disciples began to listen.

Jesus said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all--he is the greatest" (48). Jesus turned their concept of greatness upside down, challenging them to welcome a little child in his name. That would be great in Jesus' sight. Let's consider what is involved in this. Little children need to be cared for in many ways. They need love; they need affirmation; they need to be fed; they need to be trained in basic humanity, and so on. Their needs cannot be put on hold until it is convenient to care for them. They need immediate care. One who welcomes a little child accepts a great responsibility, requiring sacrifice. What is more, investing in little children does not yield immediate results. It takes years for a child to become productive. There is no human glory in caring for little children. It looks like a very mundane job and a one-sided investment. Those driven by selfish ambition cannot do it. They usually try to avoid little children. To welcome a little child, the disciples needed to lose their selfish ambition. They needed to stop thinking about their own greatness and learn compassion for a helpless young child. This would not be accomplished through mere education; it required a new spiritual birth.

The words "in my name" are important. Jesus was not trying to make the disciples good babysitters. He wanted them to welcome people into his kingdom and into relationship with him. He wanted the disciples to accept weak and needy people, share the gospel with them through word and deed, bear with them patiently, and raise them as useful people to God and man. We can find a good example in St. Paul. Paul was a great spiritual leader with a worldwide ministry. He met Onesimus, a runaway slave, who was in prison for theft. From a human point of view, Onesimus looked worthless and Paul seemed too great and busy to be concerned about him. However, Paul welcomed Onesimus in Jesus' name. Onesimus accepted the gospel through Paul and was changed. He became a useful man to his master Philemon, to Paul, and to the work of God. Tradition says he became the bishop of the church at Ephesus after Timothy. Then there is Dr. Joseph Chung. When Edwin was a troublemaker, most people did not associate with him. But Dr. Chung welcomed him in Jesus like his own son and taught the Bible to him faithfully. Gradually the word of God worked in Edwin's heart. Through the word of God, and the prayer of his wife Sheila, his family has become a house church, where Jesus is working to reveal his love and saving grace.

When we welcome little ones in Jesus, we welcome Jesus himself into the relationship. Jesus takes care of his little ones as their good shepherd. Jesus fills their hearts with love, listens to their prayers, provides for their needs, and gives them divine wisdom to live by. So those who welcome little ones in Jesus' name are greatly blessed. They learn Jesus' mind and heart deeply and grow to maturity. Those who mature in Christ are not necessarily the ones who fill their heads with complicated theology. Rather, they are those who care for Jesus' little ones from their hearts. To grow in Christ we should care for one person with the word of God and prayer.

When we care for one person in Jesus' name, Jesus is honored. Where Jesus is honored, the Father God himself comes to dwell. When God comes to dwell with a person, that person becomes truly great. God dwelling with Abraham changed him from a fatalistic and fruitless old man to a source of blessing to the world. God dwelling with the people of Israel changed them from a nation of slaves into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Though the disciples were weak and immature at the time of the event in this passage, God was with them through Jesus. God made them great, great enough to preach the gospel to all nations. Now so many parents name their children Peter or James or John or Matthew, and so on. God makes people or nations great. So the secret to true greatness is to have God with us. To have God with us, one thing is essential. It is to be humble. The Bible says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pe 5:5). When Jesus said "the least among you all is the greatest," he meant the most humble person is the greatest.

How can we sinful human beings--who become proud so easily--ever be humble enough for God to be with us? It is possible when we accept Jesus as our Savior and learn of him. Again, St. Paul is a good example. When he was driven by selfish ambition to make himself great, he became an enemy of God and a destroyer of the early Christians. Then Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul found that he was a terribly sinful man. He deserved to die. None of the things he had trusted in could save him. But Jesus loved him one-sidedly. In his great mercy, Jesus died on the cross for his sins. Jesus forgave him and called him to service. Paul accepted this grace with all his heart and began to follow Jesus. He wanted to learn everything from Jesus, especially his humbleness and taught us to do the same. He wrote in Philippians 2:5-8, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross." Learning Jesus' humbleness made Paul truly great in the sight of God. He was changed from a legalistic Pharisee to a gentle shepherd; from a prejudiced Jew to a man of God's love for all people. Now Paul is known as one of the greatest men of all times. But Paul did not seek this at all. He only wanted to know Christ better, including his humbleness.

At the beginning of my shepherd life, I was eager to do something great. So I worked hard in many ways. But no one seemed to be blessed through me, even after a couple of years. One day, Dr. Samuel Lee suggested that I learn the humility of Jesus and gave me John 1:14a. It says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." At first, it seemed to bounce off my heart. But I wrote it down every morning. One day, unexpectedly, it came into my heart. I met humble Jesus, who put aside his power and majesty and came into this world to save sinners like me. Strangely, I began to understand the needs of people around me. It was the beginning of genuine change in my inner man. Still, I have far to go in learning Jesus' humbleness. Please pray for me, and I will pray for you, too. Learning Jesus' humility is the way to true greatness. We can be humble when we welcome Jesus. Lord Jesus, come into our hearts and make us humble like you!

Second, welcome those who are working in Jesus' name (49-50). Once, when John opened his mouth, he revealed a tendency toward exclusiveness. He thought that only he and the chosen disciples had the right to work in Jesus' name; those who had not been called and trained like them, and who did not follow Jesus in their group, had no right to work in Jesus' name. So they tried to stop a man who was driving out demons in Jesus' name. But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you" (50). Jesus taught them to accept and recognize those who worked in his name. The disciples should see the big picture, the advance of the kingdom of God, not just the success of their own group. Since the Protestant Reformation, many Christian denominations and organizations have risen. Important theological issues differentiate them, and it is prudent for us to be aware of these. However, arguments over these have often led to unhealthy divisions. This does not please Jesus and discredits Christ's name to the world. We should welcome those who work in Jesus' name, as he is taught in the Bible, even though they are not part of our group. This is great in Jesus' sight.

Third, overcome prejudice through the cross (51-56). Verse 51 marks a turning point in Jesus' ministry. It says, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." The word "resolutely" tells us that Jesus was firmly decided, and had made an absolute commitment to suffer, die and rise again to fulfill God's will. In this way Jesus would purchase our redemption from sin, triumph over death for all people, and then go back to the Father in heaven. Usually, when sinful men face such a pain-filled task, they postpone dealing with it. But Jesus settled the matter in advance of the event, through a clear and firm decision. From this time on, a new and ominous sense of destiny marks Jesus' words and actions.

As Jesus set out for Jerusalem, he took the most direct way, which was through Samaria. However, people in the village did not welcome Jesus. Luke says, "because he was heading for Jerusalem." The Samaritans were prejudiced toward the Jews and vice-versa. So they missed the chance to welcome the Messiah. Prejudice makes us spiritually blind and causes us to reject others due to nationality, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, religious beliefs, skin color, hair color, clothing style, or musical taste. Seeing Jesus' rejection, James and John burned with anger. They wanted to call fire down from heaven to destroy them. But Jesus rebuked them and went on to another village. Ultimately, Jesus responded to prejudice through the cross. Jesus laid down his life for all people. After his resurrection, he sent gospel workers back to Samaria. Jesus' cross solves prejudice from the root. At the cross of Jesus, all men are found guilty of sin. The universal nature of sin and its terrible consequences relegate human distinctions to triviality. The universal love of God that embraces peoples of every tribe and language and nation is given to whoever believes, without regard to human conditions. A truly great person resolves human prejudices in the cross of Jesus Christ. Then he can welcome those who are different in the love of Christ.

Fourth, put the kingdom of God first (57-62). In verses 57-62, Luke puts together three responses to Jesus' call to discipleship. These teach us that there is a cost to following Jesus and that we must decide to pay this cost, giving a clear priority to the kingdom of God. In the first event, a man volunteered to follow Jesus wherever he went. Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Jesus had just been rejected in a Samaritan village. It was part of Jesus' lifestyle. Jesus had been born in a stable and laid in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn. Jesus had been cast out of his hometown, and cast out of the synagogues. Following Jesus would mean being like a homeless person from time to time. However, Jesus' eternal destination was the kingdom of God. Those who follow Jesus are going to the kingdom of God, eternal glory in our everlasting home. In the hope of this kingdom we endure inconveniences and hardships with joy.

In the second event, Jesus called a man to follow him. But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." This man put family responsibility before following Jesus. Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead..." It meant that spiritually dead people could bury physically dead people. Jesus also said, "...but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Those who are alive in Christ must proclaim the kingdom of God at every opportunity. This alone gives life to a dying world.

In the third event, a man volunteered to follow Jesus after saying "goodbye" to his family. Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Serving the kingdom of God is the greatest privilege that God can give a person. This privilege should be received with a deep sense of gratitude and a clear decision of commitment. Once this decision is made, there should be no turning back; no longing for the former things, or regrets about leaving one's past life. Sometimes temptation can come, even to those who have served God for a long time. We can think: "What if I had focused on my career instead of devoting so much time to

God's ministry?" Or "What if I had lived a family-centered life instead of a mission-oriented life?" This kind of speculation makes us weak and useless. We must believe Jesus' final victory and put our hand to the plow and keep on going. Those who persevere to the end, overcoming temptations, are truly great in the sight of God.

True greatness in God's kingdom is rooted in the humility of Christ. It is expressed in welcoming others and sharing the kingdom of God with them as of first importance. Who is the greatest? Jesus is the greatest. We can share his greatness when he rules our hearts.