

## 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.’”

In the last passage, Jesus healed a boy who had been suffering from demon possession. In doing so, Jesus rebuked the unbelieving and perverse generation of his time. Unbelief grieves Jesus and is the source of all the perversion and evil in the world. Therefore we must pray for America to have a believing atmosphere as one step to being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Also, Jesus revealed to his disciples that he would be betrayed into the hands of men. He wanted them to accept the fact of his betrayal and make decisions of faith to follow him to the end. Likewise, each of us must accept Jesus’ death and resurrection and make a decision of faith to follow him.

Today’s passage covers several events. In these events we can find a contrast between fallen man’s concept of greatness and Jesus’ concept of greatness. We want to be great. But we must learn from Jesus how to be truly great in the kingdom of God.

First, a truly great man is humble (46-48). Look at verse 46. “An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.” It is interesting that the disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest. They were rather ordinary men, yet each one thought he had the possibility to be really great. It is because they found hope in Jesus. At one time, they had been resigned to an ordinary life with ordinary dreams and desires. But when they followed Jesus, they met God in Jesus. They experienced the power of God to drive out evil spirits, cure diseases and even raise the dead. Then each of them began to have hope in his heart that he would be really great and the greatest. God made man to be great. God made man in his own image (Gen 1:27). As God is great, man must become great. If a man fails to become great, he will be very miserable and cannot be recognized by his wife or even by himself. When God called Abraham, he said, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:2). It was God’s will to make Abraham great. But God’s standard of greatness is different from that of fallen man.

When the disciples argued about who was the greatest, they had a worldly concept of greatness. It was based on the idea that the one who defeats others and rules them for his own glory is the greatest. They wanted to have authority to tell the other disciples what to do and they wanted the others to obey them absolutely. In this concept, Vladimir Lenin can be called great because he took control of vast Russia with a handful of coworkers. In this concept, the one who makes others serve him is great. It is said that the Carthaginian general Hannibal had such powerful leadership that soldiers under his command would jump to their deaths without question. In the Muslim world, fanatical leaders who inspire homicide bombings and terror campaigns are regarded as great men and are almost worshiped in their hometowns. This concept of greatness has resulted in terrible oppression of the weak and endless suffering among men.

It is not surprising that this argument erupted among the disciples at this time. Jesus had begun to speak about his suffering, death and resurrection and the disciples perceived that something was going to happen to change the status quo. Now the question of who would be in charge was hotly debated. Actually, Jesus had already set the order. Jesus had set apart Peter, James and John as the top three (8:51; 9:28). Among them, Peter was top. Philip and Thomas, the men of brains, were in the second circle. If Einstein were Jesus’ disciple, he would also be in the second circle. Outwardly, the disciples seemed to accept this order. But inwardly, they had not. James and John would rather die than submit to Peter’s leadership. Each of them wanted to be number one. No one wanted to be in the last place. Even Bart wanted to be number one and had been gathering data and doing research to justify his case.

In this time of crisis, what did Jesus do? Look at verse 47. “Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him.” Jesus knew his disciples very well. If their hearts were like an apple and their selfish ambition was like a worm eating the apple, he could tell precisely how big the worm was and how much damage it had done. But Jesus was not disgusted with them. Nor did Jesus rebuke them harshly. Instead, Jesus gently and clearly instructed them how to be truly great by the help of a little child. Probably each disciple eagerly wanted the place beside Jesus. But Jesus had a little child stand beside him. Look at verse 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.” Jesus’ gentle words gave a great challenge to the disciples. Instead of envying this little child and competing with him to stand beside Jesus, they had to welcome this little child in Jesus’ name. Here we learn from Jesus how to be truly great.

In the first place, the truly great man serves “in Jesus’ name.” Here the phrase, “in Jesus’ name,” is very significant. Instead of glorifying their own names, they must glorify Jesus’ name. This means that their inner motive must be changed. Many think that achievement makes one great. But to God, one’s motive is more important than his achievement. For example, in Genesis chapter 11, men made a great achievement by constructing the Tower of Babel. But God was not pleased because their motive was to make a name for themselves, not to glorify God. Greatness cannot be measured by achievement; motive is more important.

Here we remember the Apostle Paul. Once, his name was Saul, meaning “the greatest.” He wanted to be the greatest by means of his achievements in Judaism. His academic accomplishments were outstanding. He had leadership and he was willing to do the unpleasant tasks that no one else wanted to do. But he was doing it all for his own glory. In his spiritual blindness, he even participated in the stoning of St. Stephen and became an enemy of God. When he met the Risen Jesus, he realized that he was a terrible sinner because of his selfish ambition. But Jesus forgave his sins and chose him to be his instrument for world salvation (Ac 9:15). It was the one-sided grace of Jesus. After receiving Jesus’ grace, Paul’s life was completely changed, beginning with his inner motive. He no longer lived for his own glory but for the glory of Jesus. He changed his name to Paul, meaning “a small one.” He always said, “By the grace of God I am what I am...” (1 Co 15:9). And he always identified himself as “a servant of Christ Jesus.” He lived and worked in Jesus’ name. Then he became a truly great man in the sight of God.

In the second place, a truly great man serves little children. In the world, conventional wisdom is to climb the ladder of success by associating with people of ever increasing power and influence. But Jesus encouraged his disciples to embrace and serve a little child in his name. A little child cannot offer any favor to his benefactor. A little child requires attention, care and babysitting. A little child requires an investment of time and love for his development. Jesus knew this very well. Jesus had invested his life in raising his disciples. To Jesus, they were like little children. They were full of worldly desires, immature in thought and action. But Jesus welcomed each of them personally and made a decision to raise each of them as a great man of God. Jesus babysat them one by one, like a mother, until they grew to maturity. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28,29, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Look at verse 48a again. “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.’” There is a divine mystery here. Those who welcome little children in Jesus’ name actually welcome Jesus himself. Not only do they welcome Jesus, but they welcome the Father God who sent Jesus. Ultimately, it is Jesus’ presence with them that makes them great.

Jesus concluded by saying, “For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.” This does not mean that the least talented person is the greatest or that an illiterate person is the greatest. It means that the most humble man is the greatest. It means that the most sacrificial man is the greatest. It means that the man most like Jesus is the greatest. After coming back from Russia, Mother Barry spoke highly of Missionary Stephen Kim, the Russian UBF Director. She said that he kept the Russian conference focused on Jesus. He advertised and magnified Jesus and encouraged everybody to come to Jesus. It was not just with his mouth, but with his life. He has lived most humbly and sacrificially to serve Russian students in Jesus. While pioneering MIPT, he ate only one potato a day and revealed Jesus to students through diligent Bible study. Through him, Russian students could see Jesus. Missionary Stephen Kim’s humbleness and Christ-centeredness have made him a most highly recognized servant of God in the UBF world.

Second, a truly great man accepts coworkers in the name of Jesus (49-50). Look at verse 49. “‘Master,’ said John, ‘we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.’” Apparently, this man was successful in driving out demons in Jesus’ name. But John tried to stop him, thinking that only the twelve disciples had the right to drive out demons in Jesus’ name. Jesus did not agree. Look at verse 50. “‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said, ‘for whoever is not against you is for you.’” Jesus was not exclusive. Jesus was ready to recognize coworkers who advanced the kingdom of God in his name. Jesus did not struggle over group identities or

territorial rights. Jesus fought against the devil. Jesus embraced coworkers who fought against the devil in his name. Of course, we are members of a specific church or body of believers. But fundamentally we must work in the name of Jesus to advance the kingdom of God against the devil. The University Bible Fellowship has a specific mission to teach the Bible to college students and to raise self-supporting missionaries to go into all nations of the world. We have a specific prayer topic to make America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We must never lose sight of our specific mission. But we are members of the entire body of Christ. Therefore, we must embrace those who work in Jesus' name as coworkers for the kingdom of God.

Third, a truly great man knows the universal love of God (51-56). Look at verse 51. "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." Jesus had decided to take the cup of suffering and death for the sin of the world. There was a decisiveness in Jesus that startled those around him. Jesus sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him. But the people there did not welcome him. They were caught up in the ethnic conflict between Jews and Samaritans. To James and John, there could be no excuse for not welcoming Jesus. They stepped forward and asked Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" If James and John had nuclear weapons at their disposal, Samaria would have disappeared in an instant. But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.

Jesus was going to Jerusalem to die for the sin of the world. It was sin that caused prejudice to grow in the hearts of men, prejudice that leads to ethnic conflict. When Jesus died on the cross for the sin of the world he destroyed the dividing walls and hostilities between men that are rooted in the sin problem. Ephesians 2:14 says, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility..." Jesus brings true peace on earth through the universal love of God. To the Gentile writer St. Luke, the universal love of God in Jesus made him the light to the Gentiles. A truly great man knows the universal love of God for all people.

Fourth, a truly great man pays the cost to follow Jesus (57-62). As they were walking along the road, a man said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." This man wanted to commit his life to Jesus. Jesus did not say, "Sure, okay." Look at verse 58. "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 taught this man the cost of following him. Even animals have homes. But Jesus had no home. Jesus had no place in this world at all. When he tried to stay in a Samaritan village, he was rejected. More rejection and persecution awaited him in Jerusalem. Jesus must have wanted to stretch out his weary body and rest for a little while. But there was no place to lay his head. When Jesus was born, there was no place for him; there was no room in the inn. As a result, he was born in an animal's stable and laid in a manger. During the time of his public ministry, Jesus went from place to place as the Spirit directed him. When he did use a house, it was someone else's house, such as Simon's house. After his crucifixion, he did not have a burial place. Then God provided a new tomb that had belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. Yet, Jesus was there just three days. Then he rose from the dead and later ascended into heaven. There he sits at the right hand of God the Father in everlasting glory and honor. In essence, Jesus taught his disciples that life is a pilgrimage from this world to the kingdom of God. To follow Jesus is to put our hope in the kingdom of God and live as holy pilgrims on earth.

Look at verse 59. "He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'" As a human being, there may be nothing more important than giving one's father a proper burial. But look at verse 60. "Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'" Jesus did not think that burying his father was a valid excuse for avoiding God's call to proclaim the kingdom of God. When Jesus calls one to follow him, this calling must be accepted as a matter of first importance. The task of proclaiming the kingdom of God is more urgent than anything else on earth.

Look at verse 61. "Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.'" This man volunteered to follow Jesus, but wanted to have a final farewell party with his family. Look at verse 62. Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Here "looking back" is akin to being sentimental about one's past life. Jesus' disciples must overcome this kind of sentimentalism. If they look back, they cannot see where they are going. They will lose direction and focus and become useless in God's work. When Jesus' call to discipleship comes, it must be obeyed with a decision to go forward.

In this passage we learned how to be truly great in the kingdom of God. Most of all, we must learn the humbleness of Jesus and welcome little children in his name in this new fall semester.