

TRUE GREATNESS IS TO BE LIKE JESUS

Luke 9:37-50

Key Verse: 48b, “For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.”

In the last passage, Jesus’ image was changed on the mountain. He became shiny and glorious. Two great servants of God from ancient times—Moses and Elijah—appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. And God spoke from a cloud that surrounded them saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”

In today’s passage, we see a very different scene. Whereas the previous scene reflected the glory of heaven, this passage started with a glimpse of hell: a boy being destroyed by an evil spirit, and no one could do anything to help him. No one, that is, except Jesus. Jesus is our Hope and Salvation. Through four short stories in the Bible, we see the tough realities we face in the real world: demons, failures, suffering, and rivalry. Yet in the midst of this, we learn from Jesus about true greatness and what it looks like. What makes a person truly great? In 1992, Gatorade made a famous commercial ad with the motto: “Be Like Mike.” Of course, Mike was Michael Jordan, considered to be the GOAT—greatest of all time—basketball player. To many young people, they have a dream to be like Mike or some other famous athlete like Cristiano Ronaldo, or Serena Williams. Others aspire to acting greatness like Leonardo DiCaprio or Scarlett Johansson. Or some seek fame in the music world, vocally or instrumentally. Still others, dream to become a billionaire, like Bill Gates or Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg. If you don’t know who any of those people are, it’s ok. I’m not against human excellence or achievement (In fact, I like to watch excellent running or singing videos). But I’m quite sure that God’s top ten list of greatest people is surely quite different than the world’s list. To God, a great person has faith; a great person suffers for the truth; a great person humbles themselves; a great person is not exclusive. In a word, a truly great person is one whose aim in life is to follow Jesus Christ, and to become like him in mind and heart and spirit, for he is truly the GOAT—the greatest of all time.

First, truly great people have faith in Jesus.

Jesus and three of his disciples—Peter, James and John—came down from the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. A large crowd met him. A man in the crowd called out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child.” All parents like to boast about their children when they are doing well, mentioning their achievements and awards and endearing qualities. But this man had nothing to boast to Jesus about his son, his only child. Rather, he was in a desperate situation. He told Jesus about his son: “A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him.” This boy had symptoms similar to epilepsy. I’ve seen two people have epileptic seizures in my life time, and both happened

while they were playing basketball. One was a popular, athletic young man, whom I competed with and looked up to on my own high school junior varsity basketball team. In the middle of a basketball game, he fell to the floor and began shaking uncontrollably. An ambulance came, took him to the hospital, and fortunately, he recovered completely. The other person was my cousin about my age, who had an epileptic seizure while we were playing basketball outside at my cousin's house. He became rigid and foamed at the mouth. It was a freaky scene. But he also recovered.

Some physical problems can be helped by modern medicine. But the Bible teaches that some problems are caused by the work of evil spirits. This Bible passage describes one of those cases. The boy had a spirit that was destroying him. Both gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us that the spirit often threw the boy into fire or water to kill him. In other words, he was often suicidal, trying to harm or even kill himself. It was the work of demons, or evil spirits. Evil spirits try to harm and destroy people, or to harm or destroy other people through them. We hear almost daily of crazy events in the news of people harming themselves or killing other people. My wife, who is a medical doctor, has seen multiple scars on young people who have harmed themselves. Some of this is the result of mental illness that can be helped through medication. But some of this is the work of evil spirits that can only be helped by Jesus, who has all authority over evil spirits, including the devil himself. When people live under the devil's rule, it results in unbelief, perversion and corruption. Apostle Paul describes the results of living without faith in God in Romans 1:29-31: "They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy."

So how had this man tried to help his son? He heard of Jesus and Jesus' disciples who had the power to heal the sick and to command demons out of people. So he brought his son, hoping to see Jesus. But he had to settle for Jesus' nine disciples who had not gone with Jesus to the mountain. When the man finally saw Jesus, he said to him, "I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not." We remember that Jesus had given all of his disciples power and authority to heal diseases and to drive out demons. They had gone out and they had exercised that power from Jesus with success. Then why did they fail this time? Mark 9:29 gives us the answer. Jesus said, "This kind can come out only by prayer (or, by prayer and fasting)." It seems that Jesus' disciples depended on their past success, rather than depending on God in prayer.

After hearing the desperate father's plea, what did Jesus say? Jesus replied, "You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here." Jesus lamented, calling his generation "unbelieving and perverse," or,

“faithless and twisted” (ESV). Jesus diagnosed the generational sickness of his time as people having no faith and not being the way they should be. They did not think or live the way that God intended for people to think and live properly in the sight of God. They were helpless before the devil’s lies and mischief. They felt there was nothing they could do. Jesus grieved at their unbelief and their corrupted way of thinking.

How about our generation? Is our generation better than Jesus’ generation? Is Jesus pleased with us? In other words, do we have faith in God and in Jesus Christ? Or, do we feel helpless before the evidences of the works of evil all around us? Does our speech and attitude grieve Jesus and cause him to lament? Or do we have faith in Jesus that pleases Jesus?

Jesus laments and does not like to stay where there is no faith and trust in him. Nonetheless, Jesus showed great mercy to this father. Jesus said, “Bring your son here.” Do you have a problem that seems impossible or insurmountable? Do you feel helpless? Bring it to Jesus in faith and in prayer, for he is merciful and mighty.

Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. It seemed like the demon was acting up and wanting Jesus to give up in this battle. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. Jesus is mighty to save. Truly great people have faith in Jesus, rather than grieving Jesus and causing him to lament.

Second, truly great people accept Jesus’ teaching about his suffering.

While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” But Jesus’ disciples did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask Jesus about it.

This was the second time that Jesus openly told his twelve disciples about his upcoming suffering. Jesus would be delivered or handed over into the hands of men. This means that Jesus would be handed over to his enemies. It was an ominous and foreboding statement that perplexed Jesus’ disciples, and they didn’t know how to respond to it. They were dumbfounded and couldn’t even ask Jesus about it.

Here we learn that not all of Jesus’ teachings are easy or delightful to hear. Actually, no one likes to talk or hear about suffering. Those are parts of the Bible that we prefer to skip over quickly. We’d much rather hear about blessings and victory and opportunity for great exploits. But a truly great person listens to Jesus carefully, even to the difficult words, and the things that are contrary to our human desire.

Third, truly great people humble themselves, and welcome and serve others.

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. We don't know exactly why the disciples started arguing about this. Perhaps it was related to the healing of the boy. Maybe Peter, James and John rebuked the other nine disciples saying, "What's the matter with you guys? You couldn't even help the boy! If we had been here, things would've turned out differently, and Jesus would not have lamented." Then they would argue back, "Ya, right! You think you've got power on the level of our Master, Jesus? Who do you think you are? God?" In any case, the disciples were clearly arguing about who was the greatest. It meant they were comparing themselves with each other. By doing so, they showed that they were not listening to Jesus at all.

Jesus knew their thoughts. So Jesus decided to give them an audio-visual illustration to teach them something important. Jesus took a little child and had him stand next to him. 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 it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest."

What does it mean to welcome or receive a little child in Jesus' name? Often times we regard children as a nuisance and a bother and unimportant, especially in a meeting or gathering of adults. Our typical view of children is that they are mostly interested in eating, getting things, and playing games. They don't seem ready or interested in the concerns and matters of grown-ups. They aren't so concerned with the job market or prices of things or political leaders or the news. They are not concerned about how to make a profit, unless they are running a lemonade stand. Actually I was curious to know about the most successful lemonade stand. In 2012, an 8-year old girl in California raised over \$30,000 at a lemonade stand and online, and she donated the proceeds to stop human trafficking.¹ So, kids are more capable than we often give them credit for.

So what is Jesus' point about welcoming little children in his name? Again, Mark's gospel adds more detail to this parallel passage saying: "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mk 9:35). It is our human nature to draw attention to ourselves or to put ourselves above or ahead of others. How easily we can get angry when someone cuts in front of us in traffic or in a parking lot. When we are put in a lower position our natural response is anger or sorrow. It is natural to seek a promotion, a higher rank and position, and better things for ourselves. It is not natural to lower ourselves to become like a child or to help or serve others.

True greatness is loving and caring for others, rather than focusing on getting ahead and moving up in the world for ourselves. Loving and caring for others is the mind of Christ. We so easily place value on people by what they have or what they do or have done. But in the

¹ <https://www.delish.com/food/news/a39296/california-lemonade-stand-earns-more-than-30000-dollars/#:~:text=One%20little%20girl%20in%20California,the%20sweet%20and%20tart%20beverage.>

eyes of God, all people are precious because they bear the image of God. God so loved the world that he gave Jesus Christ to save us, even while we were still sinners.

What is most valuable to you? Is it not your life? If you were in a burning building on the 50th floor and had to jump out the window, what would be more valuable to you: a million dollars or a parachute that costs only \$100? Of course, the parachute. All the money in the world wouldn't mean anything in the face of death. Jesus is like this parachute, for he is our only salvation from eternal death and judgment.

I mentioned that our most valuable thing is our life. We don't want to risk or give up our life for anything or perhaps even anyone. Of course, we are always moved to tears when we hear stories of those who gave up their lives to save others. This is the heart and essence of the gospel. Jesus Christ gave up his life, rather than saving himself, in order to save us. Now, we have the chance and the privilege to give our lives up for him, by loving and serving needy souls in his name.

Children represent the helpless and needy. They cannot provide for or protect themselves. They are completely dependent on others, namely, their parents. Every normal person loves their own family members and would sacrifice for them. But usually we draw the line there. We do not love or care about all people like we do our own family members.

Jesus never married and had children. Yet he loved all people. He gave his most precious thing—his life, to save all who trust and believe in him. Jesus calls us to love and serve weak and needy people in Jesus' name. Such a person is truly great in Jesus' eyes, even if they are not recognized by the world's standards.

Fourth, truly great people are kingdom-centered, not self-centered or ministry-centered.

Right after teaching about being the least, John the disciple spoke up saying, "Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." In contemporary words this could be paraphrased: "Uh Jesus, we saw somebody from another church leading Bible studies, inviting people to church and praying for people, but they don't go to our church group. Aren't we the only ones really qualified to do that? We should tell them to stop it, right?"

In John's mind, this random follower of Jesus didn't become a follower the same way that John had. John could boastfully argue: "Jesus called me personally to come follow him. Jesus gave me authority to heal diseases and drive out demons. Who are you? Where did you get the right to do God's work?"

Perhaps John was hoping that Jesus would say, "Good work, John. That man needs to become a disciple just like you did, before he can do that kind of work." That's not what Jesus said. Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you." Mark's

gospel adds a helpful sentence here: “Do not stop him. For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me” (Mk 9:39).

Here, Jesus is saying that a truly great person is focused on serving God’s kingdom, rather than his own organization, church or ministry. Said another way: a truly great person in the eyes of God is someone who does something beautiful and fruitful for God, but who doesn’t care about getting any credit.

Sometimes we feel like we have nothing to show for our labor in the Lord. We feel that our labor has been a waste. The important thing is to ask: does Jesus think so? What does Jesus think of my labor? Has it been for him or for myself, for his honor and glory, or mine? Am I seeking his recognition and praise, or people’s recognition and praise? I think the greatest people on God’s list of greatness will be people who never made it into any history book. We don’t even know their names. They were not likely world leaders or great by the world’s standards. But they had faith in Jesus. They listened and obeyed Jesus’ difficult teachings. They humbly served others in Jesus’ name. They advanced the kingdom of God rather than their own visible ministry. They looked a lot like Jesus, growing in his mind and heart and spirit. What is your idea of greatness? Who are you striving to be like?