

Pursuing Greatness in Jesus' Kingdom

Luke 9:46-50

Competition for the Greatest

What would you think if you stopped in a coffee shop one day and found Barush, Monse, Liset, and me arguing about which of us is the greatest? Barush is definitely the coolest. Monse is the smartest. Liset is the nicest. And I am the important gringo from the United States. I don't know Spanish, but I saw on Facebook this morning that Barush called me a "gran amigo." That sounds very important to someone who doesn't know Spanish! Each of us could think that he is the greatest. But what would you think if saw we four engaged in a fierce argument about it? Wouldn't you think we were being rather silly? Childish, even? Decent adults do not do that sort of thing. But do *we* think such things? Have you ever been in a group of people and thought that you were better than the others? Maybe in class, or at home, or in English Club or on a team or musical group? Everyone at some time has the thought that he is better than people around him.

With that introduction, let's read our scripture text for today.

Who is the Greatest?

Here we have a pathetic situation. Real grown men arguing about who was the greatest. And not only that – they were the disciples of Jesus! These were the men Jesus picked to follow Him and carry on His ministry, and here they are, arguing like children. Very disappointing. We would not have done that, would we? We are better than the disciples! Now if I were Jesus, I would have put a stop to the argument, and He does – sort of. But Jesus has a predictably irritating tendency to avoid answering the question. Jesus gives the impression that He is not interested in this urgent question – that He does not care who is the greatest. Jesus tells the disciples who are behaving childishly that they should receive children.

Earlier in this chapter Jesus sent the disciples out on a preaching tour, and instructed them to stay in the homes of people in the villages where they preached. Jesus expected people to receive the disciples, and receiving meant more than a casual greeting. It meant listening to their message and providing food and shelter for them. Receiving means to accept someone as a friend and offer your services to him. Now Jesus uses the same word for children. Just as Jesus expected the townspeople to receive the important disciples of Jesus, so now He expects the disciples to receive children – to listen to them, to care for them, to treat them as though they were important. Jesus concludes this encounter by saying, "he who is least among you all is the one who is great." So Jesus does answer the question. Who is the greatest? None of the disciples – it was a child!

Now let's think about this for a minute. Why would Jesus say a child is the greatest? What is it about a child that makes him great? The disciples were behaving childishly, but it seems that actually disqualified them. Surely Jesus did not mean that great people need to have someone dress them, or take them to school. No, what made the child the greatest is that he did not care to be great! The RUF campus minister's wife in my town came for a short visit with her young children before I left yesterday. They are dangerously cute, and are fascinated by our rear staircase. We have two stairways – one in the front of the house and one in the rear. They dash toward the rear staircase and happily climb the stairs. They have no interest in anything on the second floor, they just delight in climbing the staircase. They have no thought for what others might think of them. This is what makes them great in God's Kingdom. These children have no interest in greatness. They are not even interested in who can climb the stairs the fastest. They just enjoy climbing this strange rear staircase.

The great in Jesus' Kingdom are thrilled with life. They explore the world around them, they enjoy beautiful music and rare snacks, they do the work God puts before them – all without worrying about who is greatest, or how to become great. Great adult Christians do their jobs, love their husbands and wives, care

for their children, serve the church, love their enemies. They might take important positions if they are offered to them, but they do not spend their energy seeking rewards or promotion. Like children, their joy is in receiving the love of their Father and joining Him in His work.

The Problem with Greatness

The text tells us the reason that Jesus gave this surprising answer. It was because He knew “the reasoning of their hearts.” This was not a momentary lapse, or a simple mistake by the disciples. Their hearts were damaged, and this foolish argument was an accurate picture of the foolishness of their hearts. The next paragraph provides further insight into the disciples’ problem. Someone else was building Jesus’ Kingdom, but he was not part of the disciples’ group. He was operating separately from them. That meant that the disciples could not claim any credit for his ministry. At this point, it seems that the disciples were very conscious of how following Jesus would benefit them. And they were even prepared to shut down a legitimate, fruitful ministry if they could not profit from it. Their hearts suffered from the blackest sort of selfishness.

It is a pretty grim picture and it is natural to be appalled at the wickedness of the disciples. We would never behave that way! But the truth is, we are all like the disciples. Perhaps most of us do not shamelessly jockey for positions of honor, but I find that Christians crave appreciation for the work they do in the church. It happens all the time that people become angry and stop serving because they are not appreciated. Now no doubt pastors should recognize the good work people do in the church. It is a failure of leadership not to thank those who give their time to God's work. But when that appreciation does not come, those who are great keep serving. Like children, they are not constantly calculating how their service will benefit them. They just enjoy joining heavenly Father in the work He is doing.

How about you? Are you actively serving God? And if so, are you serving God joyfully, or grudgingly? Do you serve God to gain some benefit – maybe appreciation, or honor, or even greatness? Or do you serve God simply for the joy of pleasing Him and helping others? What is the condition of your heart? Does your heart engage in the black reasoning of selfishness – like the disciples? Do you resent others who lead music better than you? Are you envious of other churches that are bigger and richer and more prosperous than yours? When you get married, will you compete with your spouse to see you is the smartest or most athletic? Are you angry with God that some of your classmates get better grades than you and don't study as hard – maybe even unbelievers? Do you pay attention to the children in your church and neighborhood, or are they a nuisance?

We all know the answer to these questions, don't we? Each of us responds differently to these situations, but none of us always serves God joyfully. At the bottom of our dark hearts is the fear, the conviction that if we selflessly serve others, we will be misused. People will take advantage of us. And we will not get the life we want. We will not get the cool friends we want, the smart clothes we want, the great job we want, the beautiful wife or handsome husband we want. We don't trust God! We think that if we serve God like this, God will abandon us to a life of misery.

Is God Trustworthy?

Let's step back a bit. Is that really who God is? Is God really a harsh task-master? Does God only pretend to care about us for the work He can squeeze out of us? Some people think so. Do you? Maybe you do a little bit. But that is not what we see in the scripture. In the Bible we see God rescuing those poor ungrateful Israelites from slavery in Egypt and giving them a rich, beautiful homeland. We see Jesus tirelessly healing the sick, casting out demons, and teaching the crowds – sometimes without adequate food and rest. Look at this passage. Even when the disciples act foolishly, Jesus does not replace them with better men, nor does He yell at them or punish them. Jesus is as loving and patient with His foolish disciples as He

is with children. And the final proof of God's love for us is that He died for us. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32 ESV)

Do you want a degree from UNAM? Do you treasure your friends? Are you longing for a wonderful husband or wife? God knows the desires of your heart. Some people will say that because God loves you, He will give you what you want. But this is not true. Sometimes God does not give us what we want. But when we trust Him and accept what He gives us, we discover that it is better than what we want. Perhaps your girlfriend will dump you or your boyfriend will be unfaithful to you. Such things are devastating. But God may be providing a better spouse for you – one so much better you cannot even imagine it now. You might not get an important job with a big corporation, but God might give you a better job which you don't even see now.

Do you trust God? We know that faith is necessary to become a Christian, but faith is necessary all our lives. Every day we are confronted with the question of God's intentions. Why is life so hard? Does God really care about me? Will you trust Him, even when God seems confusing? Can you trust God to take care of you if you waste your time on unimportant people like children? Or social outcasts? Or annoying students? Can you trust God to give you a job and promote your career if you spend your time serving others? Can you trust God to give you a good spouse if you hide yourself among poor and needy people?

The decisive answer is found in Jesus. Jesus was not reclining under the shade while He forced his disciples out into service. Jesus spent His life among the poor, the sick, the ignorant, political rebels, self-righteous religious, rich businessmen, women, and children. Jesus did not care to be great. He lived among the obscure, and He called his disciples to follow Him. Finally, Jesus gave Himself up to a horrible death so that we might be free from sin and inherit eternal life. Jesus called His disciples to follow Him, and He did not ask them to do anything He had not done.

Following Jesus

You may be thinking that this message is a call to stop being lazy and to get out there and work for Jesus. No. This message is a reflection on what it means to follow Jesus, and honestly it can be hard at times. But it is rewarding. If we will do what Jesus says, we will discover a life which is amazingly better than the one we imagine for ourselves. But you cannot imagine it! Again we are forced to trust Jesus. Will He really care for us? If we step out into the unknown – into a life that looks like it might impoverish us – can we trust Jesus that it might actually be a great life? Again, the cross gives us the answer. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32 ESV)

Jesus did not ask the disciples to do anything He had not done. What's more, Jesus did not ask the disciples to work alone. He was right there with them. And He is with us, too. On the night before He died, Jesus promised His followers always to be with them. Jesus said, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (John 14:18 ESV) And His last words on earth were, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20 ESV) Today Jesus is saying to you, "Come sit by me and talk with these precious children." "Come with me. I am having lunch with those difficult unbelievers in your class." "Let's invite those lonely people to our house for dinner." Far from driving you out into the harsh world to serve God, Jesus is inviting you to join Him in the happy activities of the Kingdom of God.

We are just like the disciples. We are foolish. Our hearts are dark. Even our best moments are clouded by selfishness. But Jesus loves us anyway. He saw us in our hateful sin and He died for us. And now He delights in us – even when we are foolish. And as we follow Jesus in this world, we discover that our hearts become more like His.

Prayer

Indeed, Lord, we do not want to admit this to each other, but our hearts are dark and foolish. If we knew how dark, we would never love ourselves. We can hardly believe that you love us, and we admit that we constantly question your love. Every day, Lord! Every day we act as though you are mean and nasty toward us. Every day we struggle mightily to advance ourselves because we doubt that you are looking out for us. Forgive us, Lord! Help us each day to follow you in faith. Help us to love the weak, powerless, and annoying, trusting you with our future. Work in us with your powerful Spirit and conquer the sin that remains in us. Through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

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