

“The Least Among You All Is the One Who Is Great” (Luke 9:46–62)

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“Who is the greatest?” That’s a question that we hear a lot in sports. There’s a lot of talk about G.O.A.T.S. in sports. It used to be that a goat was a villain, someone who made a big mistake and cost his team the game. Now, G.O.A.T. is an acronym for “Greatest Of All Time.” There’s a lot of talk about Tom Brady as the G.O.A.T., the greatest quarterback of all time. And there’s a debate about whether LeBron James or Michael Jordan is the NBA’s G.O.A.T. Some might say it was Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, or even Bill Russell, who has eleven championship rings.

The question of the greatest isn’t limited to sports. People ask who the greatest singer is, or the greatest actor or rock band. People come up with lists of the greatest movies, the greatest paintings, the greatest restaurants. If we can rank things, we do. There’s something about the human heart that desires to identify greatness. And there’s something in the human heart that wants to be great. This starts at a young age. I can’t tell you how often we tell our kids, “It’s not a competition!”

Today, we’ll see how Jesus defines greatness. We’ll see that Jesus indicates that the road to greatness isn’t through power. Greatness doesn’t come from a desire to be Number One. We’ll see in Luke 9:46–62, the passage of the Bible that we’re focusing on today.

If you haven’t been with us recently, we’re studying the Gospel of Luke, which is a biography of Jesus. It tells about his birth, his life of teaching about God and performing miracles, his death, and his resurrection from the grave. We’re just finishing the portion of the Gospel that is dedicated to Jesus’ activity in Galilee, his home region. Today, we’ll start the beginning of the section of Luke that leads to Jerusalem, where Jesus will be crucified.

We’ll begin by reading verses 46–48:

⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side ⁴⁸ and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.”¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

“Them” here refers to Jesus’ twelve disciples. They’re debating which one of them is the greatest. It’s ironic that they’re doing this immediately after Jesus told them, for the second time, that he would die (Luke 9:44–45). Jesus is going to die, and all they can talk about it is which of them is the greatest. This shows how much the disciples don’t understand what Jesus is going to do. And it won’t be the first time. A similar dispute occurs on the night before Jesus dies (Luke 22:24–27).

Jesus knows what’s in their hearts. That’s because he’s not just a man, but he’s also God. The Lord knows all our actions, all our words, and all our thoughts.

To answer the disciples, Jesus takes a child, probably one quite young, and brings the child to him. Then he says that whoever receives the child receives him, and whoever receives him receives God the Father. And in God’s kingdom, the least is great.

To understand why Jesus says this, you must know that children at that time were not regarded as great. Today, we often dote on children and cater to their whims. But things were different then. According to David Garland, “Children had no power, no status, and no rights, and they were regarded as insignificant and disposable, as witnessed by the exposure of (usually female) children in the Greco-Roman world.”² The point is not that children are particularly special. The point is that children were low in status. If you want to be great, Jesus says, you must welcome the lowly.

I don’t think Jesus means that if you’re nice to kids, you have a right relationship with God. That would go against a lot of what the rest of the Bible says about being justified by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. It’s true that those who receive Jesus, or who trust in him, receive or believe in the Father. If you have a right relationship with Jesus, you have a right relationship with God. But if you do, you’re going to have a right understanding of other people. Everyone, even the lowliest person, is made in the image of God. If you treat other people poorly, you’re disregarding God’s creation. That’s why Proverbs 14:31 says,

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,
but he who is generous to the needy honors him.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t identify which person is the greatest in God’s kingdom. He only says who is great. The one who is least among Jesus’ disciples is great. That’s another way of

² David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 404.

saying that everyone who is united to Jesus is great. Greatness doesn't come from making a great name for yourself. True, eternal greatness comes from God making you great. It comes from bearing the name that is above all names, Christ the Lord. Try to make yourself great, and you won't be. Humble yourself and have a relationship with the greatest, Jesus, and you will be great indeed.

Let's move on and read the next two verses, verses 49 and 50:

⁴⁹ John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." ⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you."

It may be strange for us to read about casting out demons, but this is something that appears fairly often in the Gospels. When Jesus walked the earth, there was heightened demonic activity. Jesus exorcised demons, and he gave his disciples authority to do the same (Luke 9:1). There are still many stories of demon possession and oppression today, though I suppose it's a somewhat rare phenomenon.

What we should focus on is that John, one of the disciples, says this right after Jesus makes his comment about receiving the child. Jesus has just said to receive the lowly, but now the disciples can't tolerate the idea that someone else might minister in Jesus' name. The story is parallel to something that happens in the Old Testament. In the days of Moses, Moses took seventy elders of Israel and gathered with them. The Holy Spirit rested on all the men, and they prophesied. They were able to speak a message from God. But this only lasted for a short time. Two other men who weren't part of that gathering had the Holy Spirit come on them, and they also prophesied. Word about this reached Moses, and Joshua, his assistant, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." But Moses said, "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Num. 11:24–29).

Now, John is basically saying, "Lord, stop them." Jesus says. "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you." The name of Jesus isn't limited to one small group of people. There are others who were following Jesus. Jesus is not the exclusive property of one person, one nation, one tribe, one church, or even one denomination. That doesn't mean that everyone who claims to be a Christian is really a Christian. People do bad things in the name of Jesus. But these other people weren't doing that. All people will either be with Jesus or against him (Luke 11:23), but that doesn't mean they all have to be in one pack. Again, this isn't a

competition. Thinking that you're the only Christian, or the only one who is right, is another way of insulting God, because there are many different Christians out there. The disciples needed to learn this.

The next paragraph in Luke begins with a statement about Jesus being determined to go to Jerusalem, where he will die. Jesus knew his mission all along. He came not just to teach people about God, and not just to do amazing things, which proved that he is the Son of God and were signs of what he will do for God's people. He came to live the perfect life that we don't live, a life of perfect love and perfect obedience to his Father in heaven. But he also came to die, to bear the punishment that our sins deserve.

Let's read verses 51–56:

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. ⁵³ But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ And they went on to another village.

Luke says that the "days drew near for him to be taken up." This is probably a reference to Jesus' ascension to heaven, which is how Luke's Gospel ends (Luke 24:51). But before that event, Jesus must die. We're told he "set his face to go to Jerusalem." That language is a way of describing people who are determined to do something (Gen. 31:21, for example). Sometimes, the prophets set their face against people to prophesy against them, to announce that they were in the wrong and that God would judge them (Jer. 21:10; Ezek. 6:2; 13:7; 14:8; 15:7; 21:2–6). But here, the language probably echoes something we read about in the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 50:4–9 says this:

- ⁴ The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may KNOW how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
- ⁵ The Lord GOD has OPENED my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.
- ⁶ I gave my back to those who strike,

and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
 I hid not my face
 from disgrace and spitting.

7 But the Lord GOD helps me;
 therefore I have not been disgraced;
 therefore I have set my face like a flint,
 and I know that I shall not be put to shame.

8 He who vindicates me is near.
 Who will contend with me?
 Let us stand up together.
 Who is my adversary?
 Let him come near to me.

9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;
 who will declare me guilty?
 Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
 the moth will eat them up.

That person speaking is the servant of the Lord, the one who would die for the sins of his people (Isa. 52:13–53:12). The passage makes it clear that he was not guilty. He wasn't rebellious. No one could declare him guilty. And yet he "gave his back to those who strike." He didn't hide his face from shame and spitting. Those words are quoted in Handel's *Messiah*, in the great aria, "He Was Despised." The very next verse says that God helps him and that he knows he won't be to put to shame. That's why he could "set [his] face like a flint." Jesus knew that his death wasn't the end of the story. Beyond the cross stood glory. But first, he had to die.

His disciples don't understand this still. They were traveling in Samaria, about to enter a village there, and Jesus had sent "messengers" to find a place to stay. But the people in that Samaritan village didn't receive Jesus. Interestingly, we're told the reason why: "because his face was set to Jerusalem." It wasn't God's plan for Jesus to linger in this village.

Two of his disciples are indignant, and they ask Jesus if they could call fire down from heaven to consume the village. Why would they do this?

To understand, you have understand something about Jewish relationships with Samaritans. According to Darrell Bock, "The Samaritans were a mixed race of Israelite and non-Israelite blood, who were despised by many pure-blooded Israelites because they believed that the Samaritans compromised the faith."³ The Samaritans were very distantly related to the northern kingdom of Israelites, who had mixed with Gentiles long ago. A couple of decades after

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 969.

this event, something happened that illustrates the tensions between Galileans and Samaritans. Some people from Galilee were traveling to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles when one of them was killed in a Samaritan town. In response, some Jewish people attacked Samaritan villages and set them on fire.⁴

Perhaps the disciples had in mind something else from the Old Testament. The prophet Elijah once called down fire from heaven to destroy a hundred soldiers sent by Ahaziah, the evil king of Israel who was in his palace in Samaria (2 Kgs. 1:1–12). James and John, whom Jesus elsewhere calls “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17), were apparently zealous and thought that these Samaritans deserved the same treatment. Jesus had told them that when a town rejects them, they should shake the dust off their sandals and move on. But these disciples didn’t want to shake the dust off their sandals; they wanted to shake the town to dust.

Jesus simply rebukes him. There are some manuscripts, which probably don’t reflect the original writing, that say, “the Son of Man came not to destroy people’s lives but to save them.” (You can find those words in the ESV footnote.) That’s certainly true. The first time Jesus came, he didn’t come to bring judgment, but salvation. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). One day, Jesus will return, and he will judge those who have rejected him (John 5:25–29; 12:47–48). But that wasn’t Jesus’ purpose when he came the first time, and it’s not the way we do things during this age.

Let’s move on to the last paragraph of this chapter. Here are verses 57–62:

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” ⁵⁹ To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰ And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹ Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶² Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Here, there are three people who say they will follow Jesus. The first one comes up to Jesus and says that he will follow Jesus wherever he goes. But Jesus says that while animals have homes, he doesn’t. Jesus probably had a home while he worked as a carpenter, but after he begins his public ministry, he goes from one place to another, staying with disciples and friends

⁴ Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.12.3–4.

and others who would receive him. But, more importantly, Jesus left his true home in heaven when the Son of God became Jesus of Nazareth. And those who follow Jesus are “strangers and exiles” on the earth (Heb. 11:8–10, 13–16; 1 Pet. 2:11). In a way, Jesus is warning this man that if he follows Jesus, he will no longer be at home in the world.

Jesus then calls another person to follow him. The man says he will, but first he must bury his father. This seems like a reasonable request. The fifth of the Ten Commandments requires people to honor their parents, and in Jewish culture, burying dead parents was one way to honor them.⁵ But Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” That may be an expression that simply means something like, “That will take care of itself.” Or he might mean that the “spiritually dead,” those who don’t follow Jesus, will take care of mundane things like that. The point is that this man shouldn’t delay. He should honor Jesus above his family because Jesus is God. So, Jesus asks the man to go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

The third person says he will follow Jesus, but first he wants to say goodbye to those at home. Jesus says, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” In other words, don’t look back, look at straight ahead at me and move forward.

What are we to make of these sayings of Jesus? They seem harsh. Perhaps Jesus is using hyperbole to show how following him is more important than anything else. To see that, we have to once again consider something related to the prophet Elijah, who casts a long shadow over this chapter of Luke. Last week, I mentioned that Elijah ran away from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in order to save his life. He was depressed and wanted to die. But God preserved his life and encouraged him by saying that he had work to do. Part of that work was anointing his successor, a man named Elisha (see 1 Kgs. 19:16). So, Elijah found Elisha and called the man to follow him. When Elijah found Elisha, Elisha was plowing a field. Elisha said he would follow Elijah but first he wanted to kiss his father and mother goodbye. Elijah allowed him to do that. Then Elisha took the animals with which he was plowing, sacrificed them, and fed the people with their flesh. That sounds strange, but I think it was a way of showing that his old life was done. He then went with Elijah (see 1 Kgs. 19:17–19).

Jesus might be alluding back to that passage. He might be saying that following him is even greater than following a mere prophet. Elisha was allowed to go back home first, but Jesus

⁵ See the non-biblical book of Tobit 4:3–4.

wants his followers to put him first. Elisha went from plowing to prophesying. Jesus takes people and has them start plowing, metaphorically speaking, for the kingdom of God.

The main point is that Jesus demands total commitment. He must come first. He must come before family and everything else. And those who follow Jesus must not look back. When Lot and his family were rescued from the wicked city of Sodom, Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). When Israel was delivered out of slavery in Egypt, their tendency was to look back and romanticize their time in Egypt (Exod. 16:3). There's something in the human heart that looks backward, probably because we know what has happened in our past, and our future is unfamiliar and feels uncertain. But Jesus wants his followers not to look back, but to look forward.

Now that we've learned the basic meaning of this passage from the Gospel of Luke, what do we learn? What do we learn about Jesus? And how should we live?

I want to make four points that line up with the four parts of today's passage. The first is that to be great, we must be willing to be lowly. Jesus tells his disciples to receive children, who were considered lowly. We must be willing to associate with the lowly, for they are made in God's image, just like us. We shouldn't think that we are greater than other people. The apostle Paul tells us "not to think of [ourselves] more highly than [we] ought to think" (Rom. 12:3). We shouldn't see life as a competition, a survival of the fittest. That's a different worldview, not the Christian one. Life is not a competition. To be great, we must be associated with Jesus. And putting our trust in Jesus means humbling ourselves. It means acknowledging that we are sinners, rebels against God. We begin life as his enemies. If you don't know your lowly position as someone who has failed to live life on God's terms, you can't understand Jesus' sacrifice and God's grace. God made us to live for him. He is supposed to be at the center of our lives. And we ignore that and make ourselves or something else the center of our lives. This is nothing less than a war against God. We deserve death.

But God did something amazing. He sent his Son, his only child, to die in our place. If we would humble ourselves and receive that special Child, we will receive God himself. Jesus humbled himself because he's great. If Jesus can humble himself and become a human being, experiencing all the pain and suffering that came with a human life, humbling himself to the point of being killed though he was innocent, we can humble ourselves. If we do that, we are great. Everyone who does that is great. Everyone who is united to Jesus is on the same team.

And that leads me to the second point. The Christian life, as I said, is not a competition. All Christians are on the same team. We shouldn't compete with other Christians, with other churches. If other people are doing the work of Jesus, we should rejoice. We shouldn't covet other people's successes or spiritual gifts. If people are teaching the truth about Jesus and loving others the way that Jesus would want them to love others, then we should be satisfied with that. God gives us a specific role to play. We may not all see great success, or have our names prominently displayed. That doesn't matter. All Christians are great in God's eyes. The important thing is to be faithful, to do what God has called us to do. We can rejoice that there are Christians throughout the world, who sometimes do things a bit differently than we would do them. Jesus isn't our exclusive property. It's the other way around: we're Jesus' exclusive property.

The third thing we see in today's passage is how to respond to those who reject us. If we live as Christians, people will hate us. They will hate that we're different, that we don't endorse their views or condone their practices. When we try to share the message of Christianity with others, there will be times when we're rejected. How do we deal with this?

Jesus teaches us to respond not in anger, not to avenge ourselves, but to respond in love. When we're wronged, we don't retaliate. Sometimes, we just walk away. Jesus already taught us to love our enemies (Luke 6:27). That sentiment is taught in the book of Romans, too. Romans 12:17–21 says,

¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The reason why we can let people do wrong things to us, and why we can tolerate people doing evil in general, is because we know that vengeance is God's. In the end, Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42). He will avenge his enemies, all those who refuse to trust in him. That means we don't always have to defend ourselves. Jesus didn't defend himself. He let evil people do the most evil thing possible: to kill the Son of God.

That doesn't mean that we don't try to stop evil when we can. That doesn't mean that governments can't punish evil. In fact, right after Paul's words in Romans about not repaying

evil, he talks about government's role in punishing evil (Rom. 13:1–7). But we can't respond to evil with more evil, and we don't respond to evil with a wish to put all our enemies to shame.

The Christian message spreads not through the power of man, or through violence. It is spread through the power of God, which works through words of persuasion. Islam was first spread through violence. It worked its way through the Middle East and northern Africa through violence. That happened in the seventh century. It's a matter of historical record.⁶ Christianity is very different. The early church had no political power or military might. They lived out their faith, loved people, and told them the good news. That's because the Son of Man didn't come to squash his enemies with power. Instead, he died for his enemies.

The last point is that when we turn to Jesus, we must put him first, and there's no looking back. Jesus might have been speaking in hyperbole when he told those men that they couldn't bury a father or say goodbye to family. Christians should do those things. But he certainly meant that we can't delay making a decision to follow Jesus. We can't use lame excuses. (We'll read a parable about people who make excuses in Luke 14:12–24.) We can't say, "Oh, I know I should follow Jesus, but things are really busy right now. I'll do that later." The time to follow Jesus is now. Following Jesus is more important than whatever else is going on in our lives. Don't delay following through on a commitment to Jesus. Perhaps you know Jesus wants you to do something and you've been waiting. Maybe it's a personal thing, or a commitment to Jesus' church. Don't make excuses; don't delay.

When we turn to Jesus, there is no looking back. The apostle Paul said he didn't look back at his old life, his accomplishments or what he used to be. Instead, he looked forward to being more like Jesus and to the time when he would see Jesus face to face (Phil. 3:13–14). We can look back for all kinds of reasons. We can look back at the things we used to do before we became Christians, how we used to have fun. But we must realize that we were doing things that were unhealthy for us. Some things that are bad for us can be fun at that time, but they're also self-destructive. I'm sure doing drugs is fun for a moment, but I wouldn't advise you do it. Don't look back to the "glory days," because the best is yet to come.

Sometimes, we look back at our old sins, our regrets. When we do that, we should look further back in time. Look back to an event almost two thousand years ago, when Jesus died on the cross. Jesus died for sins, even the worst things we could do. Even before you did those

⁶ See Rodney Stark, *God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

things, the Son of God knew them, and he went to the cross to pay for them. He stared straight at it and was determined to go forward. He looked ahead, not back, knowing that after death came glory. The same is true for us.

If we give up trying to be great, we become great. If we let go of trying to be powerful, God will give us his power. If we stop trying to avenge ourselves, we can trust that God will right every wrong. And if we give up our lives to Jesus, we will find true, eternal life.