

THE GREATEST MAN IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Luke 9:37-62

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.'"

Study Questions:

1. What did Jesus and his disciples find when they came down the mountain? Why did Jesus lament? What did he do that made people marvel at the greatness of God? What did Jesus teach his disciples about God's purpose for him? (37-45)
2. Read verse 46. What does this argument reveal about the disciples' human ambition? Why were they like this? How did Jesus teach them true greatness? (47-48) What lessons can we learn from Jesus' words about true greatness? What does it mean that the least shall be greatest? (See also Mt 5:3,5; Jas 4:6; 1Co 15:9-10)
3. Read verses 49-50. How did John show his pettiness--and Jesus his greatness? What are some other examples of pettiness here? How is Jesus different? (50,51,55-56) Why is exclusiveness the mark of a petty man? Anger?
4. Read verses 57-62. What must we learn about the cost of following Jesus? How must one who would follow Jesus to greatness deal with his future security problem? What must be his priority? What kind of decision must he make?

In the time setting of this passage, Jesus was increasingly occupied by the thought of Jerusalem, where suffering and crucifixion awaited him. Jesus may have been bracing himself for this. What about his disciples? They were engrossed with a power struggle among themselves. Their question was which of them would be the greatest.

In spite of this, Jesus taught them what true greatness was. On their way to Jerusalem, a father, whose son was possessed by an evil spirit, wanted Jesus to heal his son. Out of compassion, Jesus healed the boy. And several people expressed their willingness to follow Jesus out of their sentiment. Jesus kindly taught them the cost of following him.

First, Jesus cast out an evil spirit from a boy (37-45).

It was the time when Jesus just came down from the transfiguration mount. With his three top disciples, Peter, John and James, Jesus came to the foot of the mountain where the nine disciples were waiting for them. A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son (38). The boy screams and convulses, foaming at the mouth. So I must watch him. Otherwise he would commit suicide at any time" (39).

Jesus knew that the boy was possessed by the demon. Jesus' disciples had tried to heal him with the power and authority which they had had at the time of fieldwork training (9:1). But the demon in him did not budge. Looking at the situation, Jesus lamented over spiritual leaders of the time, saying, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?" (41) Jesus lamented that the spiritual leaders of the time were too corrupt and indifferent toward the helpless. They also did not have spiritual authority to rescue the little boy from demon possession. These religious leaders also could not help all other suffering sheep because they were not shepherds, but robbers. After lamenting, Jesus rebuked the demon in him. Then the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion and left him. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God (43). Out of his compassion, Jesus could heal the young boy. We can also heal the demon-possessed young people when we have the compassion of God. We can heal the demon-possessed young people when we teach them the Bible one-to-one. This was a good chance for Jesus to explain what he would do. So Jesus said to his disciples, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men" (44). But the disciples did not

understand God's purpose for Jesus because they were still earthbound and were most afraid of being changed (45).

Second, a truly great man (46-48).

Look at verse 46. "An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest." Probably, they were in hallucination that the earthly messianic kingdom would come as soon as Jesus arrived at Jerusalem. When they deciphered his going to Jerusalem, they misconstrued by their human ambition, such as the thought of becoming cabinet members in the earthly messianic kingdom. But who would be the greatest among them troubled their hearts. When Jesus went up the Mount of Transfiguration with the three top disciples, he left the other nine disciples at the foot of the mountain.

Jesus had already set the order and role of each disciple. The top three were Peter, James and John. Among the three, Peter was the top. Philip and Thomas, the men of brains, were in the second circle. Andrew, the brother of Peter, because of his good influence, might have been recognized as a kind of top leader-without-portfolio. Outwardly, they seemed to follow the order which Jesus had set among them. But they were too young spiritually to submit to this order. Peter was more than sure that he was at the top at the present as well as in the future. James and John would rather die than be under him, even if it was in the messianic kingdom. So they had negotiated through their mother to obtain the top positions to the right and left of Jesus' throne in his kingdom (Mt 20:21).

Luke the historian understood well the disciples' human desire to be the greatest. In order to follow Jesus, they had left their sweet homes. Peter, James and John had given up a prospering fishing business. On account of their human ambition, they could overcome their petty desires for small pleasures. They were compelled by human ambition to risk their future security. Why are men like this? It is because God created man in his own image, and God put in man endless desire to grow in the greatness of God (Ge 1:27). This is the

unfathomable wisdom of God. When we have the desire to be great in God we are true men.

Look at verses 47,48a. "Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside 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.'" From his words, we learn who would be truly great men.

A truly great man is one who serves. Here, a child is a symbol of the helpless. At that time, children and women were regarded as unimportant, for they had no labor power to make money. As we know well, children don't know how to feed themselves. They don't know how to change their diapers. Jesus said that a truly great man is the one who helps the helpless in the name of Jesus until they can stand on their own feet. It requires a labor of love. It requires a labor of prayer. It also requires that we meet all the impositions of the helpless. High officials who exercise authority over the helpless are not really great. Whoever wants to become great must serve the helpless. Truly great men are those who serve the helpless in the name of Jesus.

A truly great man is one who knows God personally. Look at verse 48 again. "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." By a syllogism, this verse deduces the truth that one who welcomes the helpless can welcome Jesus. And the one who welcomes Christ welcomes the Father in heaven. The point is that the greatest man in the sight of God is the one who has the compassion of God. And with the compassion of God they help the helpless. The Bible calls David "a man after God's own heart" (Ac 13:22). It is because he had the compassion of God in his heart.

A truly great man is one who is humble like a child. A child has many beautiful characteristics. Generally, children are innocent; a child does not hold grudges against other children; soon he forgets that they fought and becomes friendly again. A child simply believes

whatever he is told. A child has a learning mind. A child is obedient. The most beautiful point of all is that a child is humble like Jesus.

Look at the last part of verse 48. "For he who is least among you all--he is the greatest." This doesn't mean that the disciples in the third circle, such as Bartholomew or Simon the Zealot, were the greatest. This means that the most humble person among them was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). Again, James 4:6 says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." But humbleness does not come naturally. Paul became humble when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus and came to know what a wretched sinner he was. He said in 1 Corinthians 15:9,10a: "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am...." Jesus is the greatest of all in history because he is the most humble and lowly, even though he is the Son of God. Jesus humbly served all kinds of sinners as his friends and shepherds.

Third, a truly petty man (49-56).

A truly petty man is an exclusive person (49,50). John was spiritually young, but his loyalty to Jesus was matchless. He was clear that whoever did not side with Jesus should be punished. One day John saw that someone was casting out a demon "in the name of Jesus." John tried to stop him from casting demons out of men because he was not one of them. But the man continued to cast out demons. John became upset; and he came to Jesus and said, "Master, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us" (49). The man was doing a wonderful work of God. But John did not accept him because he was not one of them. These days many religious leaders shamelessly condemn each other simply because they are not one of them. Exclusive people are dangerous and petty creatures and they cannot please God.

A truly petty man is an angry person (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 knew well what was before him. It was to obey the will of God to die on the cross to save men from their sins. The betrayal, the unjust trial, the mockery, the scorn, the crown of thorns, the spitting, the nails and the agony on the cross might have spread before Jesus' mind's eye like a picture. But he never flinched or shrunk back for a moment from going to Jerusalem. As he traveled toward Jerusalem, Jesus sent his messengers on ahead to a Samaritan village, a Gentile territory, to get a place to stay. But the Samaritans did not welcome him because of their hatred toward the Jews and because they thought Jesus was going up to Jerusalem to have a meeting with dignitary Jews. James and John felt that their pride was hurt and asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" (54) They were angry at their rejection, like roaring thunder, and the expression of their anger was somewhat ornery and imperious. In their self-righteous anger, they were ready to burn down a whole village and its people. No matter what the reason may be, angry people are petty people.

Fourth, the cost of following Jesus (57-62).

In order to follow Jesus we must commit our security problem to God. Look at verse 57. "As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'" The man wanted to follow Jesus at heart and become a great man of God. How did Jesus reply? Look at verse 58. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." In light of Jesus' words, this man wanted to establish his future security first, and then do the work of God. Such people look ideal, but in the end they become like tax collectors. When we want to follow Jesus, we must first decide to commit our future security problem to God's hand by believing his promise. Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

In order to follow Jesus, we must give first priority to Jesus. Look

at verse 59. "He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'" He wanted to finish his family responsibilities first, and then obey Jesus' calling. We are not even sure that his father was then dead. But this man seems to have been one of Confucius' disciples who had learned that a funeral service was gravely important. His priority was on his family affairs. Suppose by the time he buried his father, he would have many children to send to college and support until they could graduate with honors. For him, there were so many important things in the world which demanded first priority. If we want to follow Jesus, we must give first priority to God.

In order to follow Jesus we must make a decision of faith. 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.'" He was a person who wanted to follow Jesus and Kathy at the same time. His problem was that he had never made a decision of faith. In order to follow Jesus we must make a decision of faith and renew it every day. 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, Jesus does not acquiesce to our indecisiveness. The privilege and seriousness of following Christ are of tremendous magnitude; there is no room for indecisive people. May God help us accept the humbleness of Jesus and be a truly great man in God's kingdom.