

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

Luke 9:37-50

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 it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.’”

In today’s passage, just after Jesus predicts his suffering and death a second time, his disciples began to argue about who is the greatest among them. **“Who would be the greatest?”** In the midst of so many trials and issues around them, this question was burning in their hearts. Then and now, this is such an important issue to human beings. Each person wants to be truly great, and the greatest. This is not bad; it is part of our nature as beings made in the image of a great God. Jesus did not rebuke his disciples for wanting to be great. Rather, he introduced what true greatness is and how we can become truly great. This is a paradoxical teaching which reveals Jesus’ mindset. Let’s learn from Jesus how to be truly great. This passage teaches us in several ways.

First, a truly great person has faith in Jesus and helps needy people (37-43a). Verse 37 begins, **“The next day...”** It was the day after the glorious transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain—an exclusive conference—which only Peter, James and John had been invited to for the sake of key member training. There was a danger that this would divide the disciples. Nevertheless, Jesus intentionally focused on the three to raise them as leaders in his ministry. Jesus is not bound by the principles of democracy. The three top disciples felt great. They were full of glorious hope and vision. On the other hand, the nine disciples felt inferior and began to doubt Jesus’ love. They must have been eager to prove themselves and be promoted to the top class. As Jesus and the three came down the mountain, a large crowd met them. A man in the crowd called out, **“Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child”** (38). An only child is everything to his father. His father must have done all that he could to provide for him with the vision he would be a great man. But to his dismay, the young boy was possessed by a demon. We don’t know why this happened, but only that the boy was being destroyed by an evil spirit. The boy would suddenly scream and foam at the mouth. This was not just an occasional problem; the evil spirit scarcely ever

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left the boy (39). In his helplessness, the father came to Jesus. He did not find Jesus. So in desperation, as an alternative, he begged the disciples to drive out the spirit. To the disciples, it was the moment to display their spiritual authority. But they could not drive it out (40).

Here we learn two things. The first is that we are involved in a spiritual struggle for the souls of our children. Naturally, parents want their children to grow well and be successful human beings. We provide for their needs and try to give them the best education possible, spending a lot of money. But we must be aware that children are spiritually vulnerable. They need protection from the power of the devil. Wise parents will invest in their children's spiritual lives by making a godly home environment, praying for their children, teaching the Bible to them, and encouraging their participation in children's ministry. This responsibility falls first and foremost on parents. Furthermore, as a community, we should be concerned for all of our children. We thank God for the beautiful children's ministry of Isaac and Rebecca Choi over the last thirty-six years in Chicago, and Tim and Sharon McEathron's great shepherd's heart for children. So many children have been blessed spiritually through them. After retirement, the Chois have visited many chapters in America and other nations to serve children's ministry. Next week they will go to Korea and serve some local chapters. Let's pray for the spiritual well-being of our own children, all the children in our community, and those scattered around the USA and the world.

The second thing we learn is to bring troubled children to Jesus. Parents love to brag about the good points of their children and tend to cover their mistakes and weaknesses. It was not easy for the father to bring his son's problem to Jesus. He might have felt shameful. Perhaps people would criticize his parenting and blame him. But this father came boldly to Jesus by faith, openly exposing his son's problem. Let's bring our children to Jesus.

How did Jesus respond? Jesus lamented, **“You unbelieving and perverse generation”** (41a). Jesus was willing to help the son and the father. But he first rebuked the entire generation for being unbelieving and perverse. Why? To Jesus, the demon possessed boy's tragedy was not just the father's problem, or the disciples' failure, but it was a result of the unbelief of the entire generation. When there is an atmosphere of unbelief, it is everyone's responsibility. Each person is responsible to express their faith, fighting

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against the unbelief of the world. Where faith in God is not expressed, an atmosphere of unbelief grows and perversion follows. People call what is good evil, and what is evil good. They say rebellion is bold and obedience is foolish. They justify unfaithfulness and all kinds of impurity. We do not generally take the sin of unbelief as seriously as other sins. But to Jesus, unbelief is a serious sin and we should recognize it as such.

Jesus not only lamented the unbelief of that generation, he was ready to solve the immediate problem. He went on to say, **“How long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here”** (41b). Some Greek philosophers taught the “impassibility” of God—that is, that he does not feel any pain or burden. But Jesus’ words reveal that it was very painful for him to live among unbelieving people. Jesus needed great patience to bear with sinful people. We should not take his patience for granted. St. Paul said, **“Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”** (Ro 2:4) When we commit sins, Jesus grieves and feels great pain. When we suffer, Jesus also suffers with us.

Yet Jesus does more than that. Jesus is able to solve the problem. Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. Jesus did not shrink back at all. Rather, he rebuked the impure spirit. Jesus fought against the power of sin and the devil, not with people. At Jesus’ rebuke, the demon had to flee with no choice. Due to the evil spirit, the boy had been badly damaged. But Jesus healed all of his wounds and pain in a moment, and he was completely well. Then Jesus gave him back to his father (42). His father was so happy and felt that life was worth living because of Jesus. Now he could have a hope that his son would grow to be a man of God, marry a godly woman and be a blessing. When people saw what Jesus had done, they saw God (43a). Here we learn that a truly great person has faith in Jesus and helps others.

Second, a truly great person participates in the suffering of Jesus (43b-45). People were all marveling at what Jesus had done (43b). People felt joyful and victorious and were praising Jesus. Jesus’ approval rating reached 95%. It might have been tempting to just enjoy the moment. The disciples must have been relieved and felt that happy days were theirs again. Their dreams of messianic glory with Jesus seemed to be a reality. At this moment,

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what did Jesus do? 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”** (44). Why did Jesus talk about this serious subject at this moment? Jesus was determined to plant the truth about the Messiah in their hearts: The Messiah must suffer and die first, and then enter into glory. This is the core of the gospel. This is the unchangeable truth of the gospel. Jesus taught this to them again and again, until it happened and they finally accepted it. Here we learn that we must teach the gospel truth without compromise in any situation. Methods may change and we should be aware of the context, but we can never change the truth of the gospel in any culture or generation. This gospel truth must be defended, preserved, guarded and proclaimed. The gospel changes the culture, but the culture cannot be allowed to change the gospel. The gospel changes people, but people cannot be allowed to change the gospel. The gospel is the only way of salvation, the standard of God’s judgment, and a matter of life and death to every person ever born. Jesus said, **“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned”** (Mk 16:16).

When Jesus taught this gospel truth, at first his disciples did not understand what this meant and were afraid to ask him about it. Luke commented that it was hidden from them so that they did not grasp it (45). However, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, they could understand and accept the gospel by the help of the Holy Spirit. They joyfully participated in Jesus’ sufferings. When they were summoned by the Sanhedrin and flogged, they had no bitterness or regret. Rather, they were full of joy because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Jesus (Ac 5:41). As they participated in Jesus’ suffering, they became truly great men.

Third, a truly great person welcomes a little child in Jesus’ name (46-48).

When Jesus predicted his suffering and death, the disciples did not grasp the spiritual meaning of his words. Though they had eyes, they could not see. Though they had ears, they could not hear. Though they had minds, they could not understand. They were spiritually blind, deaf and dull. In truth, they did not want to hear what Jesus was saying because they were afraid of losing their dreams and not fulfilling their worldly ambition. So they greatly misunderstood what Jesus had said. They fully expected Jesus to become a glorious ruler, with power and honor, as they made their way to Jerusalem. They began to consider their own positions in Jesus’ kingdom and who would

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be the greatest among them. Each of them wanted to be the top, and none of them wanted to be last. Each of them wanted to be somebody, to give orders and to be served. None of them wanted to be nobody, to obey orders or to serve the others. We can understand them. With this mindset, they began to argue with each other about who would be the greatest. The hidden ambition in each one's heart was a threat to Jesus' community. At that time, Jesus had his own heavy burden, due to his own impending suffering and death. Yet none of the disciples cared about him; they were engrossed with their own selfish ambition. It would be easy for Jesus to be upset. How did Jesus deal with this issue?

“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. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest’” (47-48). Jesus let a little child serve as a living illustration. When we think of a “little child” we usually imagine cute and adorable. But in those times little children were not highly regarded; they were not counted in numbering crowds; they were insignificant and marginalized. They were not usually welcomed, but considered a nuisance. It is human nature to welcome those who are rich, famous, powerful, talented, and attractive. We receive some benefit from them. But it is not so easy to welcome those who are poor and needy. We cannot expect any benefit from them; rather, we are greatly burdened. But here, Jesus identifies himself with a little child. In welcoming such children in Jesus' name, we welcome Jesus himself. Whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes the one who sent him. This is the secret to having fellowship with God the Father.

The word “welcomes” is repeated four times in verse 48. It means to accept the presence of a person with friendliness. It means to respect them, appreciate them and be glad to see them. When we are welcomed in this way by others, we feel good. This attitude of welcoming is not based on the benefit others give or the merit they have. It is acceptance of the person themselves. It is to acknowledge their values simply because they are human beings made in God's image.

This welcoming attitude comes from having the mindset of Jesus. Jesus welcomed anyone and everyone who came to him. Jesus never discriminated

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on the basis of age, gender, race, social status, or any other human distinctives. Jesus welcomed Nicodemus, a man of standing in society. At the same time, Jesus welcomed a Samaritan woman with a scandalous past. When a man with leprosy, who was disfigured and wretched, came to him, Jesus welcomed him with a willing heart, touched him, and healed him (5:13). When a burdensome paralyzed man was brought to him, Jesus welcomed him, called him, “**Friend,**” forgave all his sins, and healed his paralysis (5:20,24). Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners and ate with them (5:29). When a scary demon-possessed man ran up to him, Jesus didn’t run away. Jesus welcomed him and struggled with him until the demons were driven out (8:29-30). Jesus welcomed a crowd of needy people, who interrupted his plans, and served each of them one by one (9:11). On top of all this, Jesus called his disciples, welcomed them as they are, had intimate fellowship with them and shared life together for 3 ½ years. Jesus had a big heart like the Pacific Ocean to accept, respect and love all kinds of people. In contrast, those who only accept one kind of person have a small heart, like a creek. Such people always have trouble in their hearts and are full of critical thoughts and complaints because of someone they cannot accept. But when we have a big heart like Jesus, we can welcome anyone and everyone.

As we know well, Mother Sarah Barry has a welcoming heart. All kinds of troubled people go to her. She welcomes them, listens to them, feeds them, and prays for them. Not long ago, a very troubled young man came to us. He was so unpredictable and fierce that no one wanted to welcome him. But Mother Barry did. She accepted him and struggled with him and helped others to accept him as well. Because of this he could receive healing and gain new strength and is alive now. Mother Barry could do this because she has Jesus’ mindset. Having Jesus’ mindset is crucial in welcoming people. What is the secret to having it? It is to accept Jesus with faith. Because of our proud mind and spiritual blindness—hating Jesus’ way of humility—and despite our stubbornness, Jesus went the way of the cross for us. Jesus suffered and died to forgive and liberate us from pride, selfishness and evil prejudices.

Learning Jesus’ welcoming heart is not just a personal matter. It should characterize our community. If we compete with each other to be the greatest, like Jesus’ disciples, there will be no understanding, respect, acceptance or love. If we criticize and blame each other, we mutually wound each other. If

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sincere young believers sense this kind of environment, they will be disgusted and not return. On the other hand, when we welcome little ones in Jesus' name, bear with the failings of the weak, and encourage and serve one another in Jesus' name, then Jesus will be exalted. The beauty and love of Jesus will fill our hearts and our community. Each person will be happy and there will be an environment of love that attracts young people to Christ. They will like to hang around and can become disciples of Jesus too, who can grow in his mindset. This is the way we can all become truly great together in Jesus. Greatness is not a race with winners and losers. It is not a fight where one person stands above all others. Greatness is open to all of us if we will humble ourselves in service. This is why Jesus said, "**Whoever....**" Everyone can be the greatest.

Fourth, a truly great person accepts others who work in Jesus' name (49-50). As Jesus talked about who is the greatest, John spoke up and said, "**Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us**" (49). John had a concept of exclusive authority. He might have expected Jesus to commend him for speaking up like this. But Jesus said, "**Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you**" (50). Jesus wants us to be inclusive, rather than exclusive. This is only possible when we have Jesus' mindset. Jesus is the head of the church universal, of which we are a small part. We should acknowledge anyone and everyone who works in the name of Jesus. Let's welcome the least in Jesus' name so that we may be truly great. Let's make a welcoming community so that many lonely and needy young people may come to Jesus and grow as his disciples.