

## Lessons on Discipleship (Part 5)

### Luke 9:43-48

We are going to look at another lesson on discipleship from Luke chapter 9 today and another interaction between Jesus and his disciples, and this lesson has to do with our desire to achieve greatness. A lot of us are driven by the desire to achieve greatness. It's a huge motivator in our world. It's encouraged in our schools, it's sought after in athletics and academics, it's embedded in all the competitions we have throughout our society. Our media puts tremendous value on it. A whole lot of people want to achieve greatness – it might be in sports, business, parenting, government, even in our hobbies.

What is greatness? I think we all have a similar idea. I found an article entitled: "The Measure of Greatness" from the International Leadership Institute and they say that *"Greatness is usually defined by success or winning either by making the highest score, having the best economy, or accomplishing more than everyone else. Whoever wins is great, certainly greater than whoever lost."*

I think this is pretty accurate. Greatness means to be the best, to win, to reach the top, to succeed. And I think we can all see it's a common desire whether that's in individuals, families, companies, teams, even countries. If I look at my life I can see that I've wanted to be great. In high school and college, it's probably the thing I wanted most. I wanted to be the greatest athlete in my school, the greatest artist, the greatest student, the greatest singer. I wanted to win games, win races, I wanted people to notice me and want to be like me.

This morning I want to talk about greatness and the Christian life. Is it ok to want to be great? If so, is it any different than greatness in the world? What does greatness look like as a Christian? I think a lot of us think of pastors and missionaries and influential church leaders when we think of greatness in Christ's kingdom. People who lead big churches, who lead thousands to Christ, and are very influential in ministry. I think we assume that if we're going to be great as a Christian, that's what we need to aim for.

But our story today is going to dismantle that perception. We're going to see an interaction that Jesus had with his disciples where their desire for greatness

comes to the surface and we're going to see what Jesus had to say about it and how that applies to our lives today.

This story takes place soon after the story we saw last week where the disciples couldn't cast a demon out of a boy. It takes place back in Capernaum, which was Jesus' home base for ministry. Luke records that after Jesus cast the demon out of the boy the people everywhere were marveling at him. He was getting all kinds of attention and praise. He was achieving a certain level of greatness that few ever did. And the disciples had a front row seat. We've talked before about what their expectations were for their future, and how they were a lot different than where Jesus was actually going. He had broken the news about his death to them before and as we begin, we see him do so a second time.

Read Luke 9:43-45.

*But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, <sup>44</sup> "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men." <sup>45</sup> But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying."*

He was telling them about his death and resurrection, but it was so different than what they were expecting they just couldn't receive it. They could see his fame and popularity. They believed he was the Messiah who was supposed to unite Israel and establish an earthly kingdom. And him dying just didn't fit into their thinking. He was headed for greatness and since they were his chosen Apostles, they were too. That's how they were thinking despite Jesus words, and you can see that in an argument they had shortly after.

Read Luke 9:46.

*An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.*

That's about all that is said about the argument, and it's pretty straightforward. I expect their understanding of greatness was similar to ours and they were wondering who among the 12 would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. Maybe it would be Peter, the bold leader. Maybe John who was so close to Christ. Maybe one of the three who went with Jesus up to the mountain just a few days earlier. I don't know if they were making a case for themselves or for one of the other

disciples, but whatever it was, they had the desire to achieve greatness – a position of great power and influence right next to the Messiah. Later on we see two of them, James and John, ask Jesus in Mark 10:37 *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”* These were positions of great honor and what it meant to be great in their minds. And we might think the same way. That’s what greatness is, even in Christ’s kingdom.

But Jesus had a much different idea. In Christ’s mind, greatness is almost the opposite, and that’s how he responded when he heard their argument.

Read Luke 9:47-48.

*But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side<sup>48</sup> 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.”*

This was a radical redefinition of greatness: *“He who is least among you all is the one who is great.”* How can that be? By definition, isn’t “the least” the least? The “least” is the opposite of great. And yet here Jesus says the least is the greatest. What did he mean?

To teach them what true greatness is, he took a little child beside him. To the disciples, children weren’t very important in ministry. Children were loud and got in the way of all the important things Jesus was doing. The disciples thought they were supposed to keep them away. Jesus was too important to be bothered by little children...

But that’s not at all what Jesus thought. Later on this comes up in a confrontation he had with his disciples. Mark 10:13-16 says: *“And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them.<sup>14</sup> But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”<sup>16</sup> And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.”*

Jesus had time for little children. They were very important to him. And in Jesus’ definition of greatness, the way a person responds to children, or others like them

in their society, is a true indication of one's greatness. So, bringing the child near, Jesus told his disciples: *"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."*

Matthew 18:4-6 fills us in with a few more details about what Jesus meant: *"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup>Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup> but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."* To receive a child in Jesus' name is to do the opposite of causing them to sin. It's to lead them to Christ – to humble yourself to get down to their level, pay attention to them, and treat them as just as important to Christ's kingdom as anyone else – just as important as the wealthy, the powerful, the rulers.

I think of this often on Sunday mornings. Before church and after church there are a lot of important people that come up to talk with me. Sometimes it's the worship team leader; sometimes it's the sound booth operator; sometimes it's a person I've had contact with that wants to give me an update; sometimes it's someone I haven't see for a while who wants to say hi. These are all important people who have important things to talk about.

But sometimes it's kids – maybe one of my own or one of yours. When a child comes up to me it's a different scenario – they're small, dependent, playful, immature. They aren't going to talk to me about my job or the worship service. They aren't going to make important church decisions or lead a ministry. They're not going to give a lot of money to the church. They're going to run around and play and scream and go to Discovery Land. They want to tell me about their pet rabbit or chicken. What should a pastor do? What is the sign of true greatness?

In the world's eyes the adults are important and the kids are not, and if you want to be great in the world, you pay attention to the adults and kids aren't really worth your time. But that's not at all the way Jesus thinks: *"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* In Jesus' mind, true greatness is revealed through humility – lowering yourself down to the level of receiving children. It isn't having the highest position of authority that everybody looks at. It's humbling yourself like a child and receiving them. It comes

from lowering yourself down and treating others as important – including the least in our society. In Mark's account of this story, he says that the way Jesus started this conversation was to tell his disciples: *"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all"* (Mark 9:35).

That's what greatness is. It isn't climbing the ladder to the top and getting everyone else out of the way; it's lowering yourself to the place where you serve those people. Greatness is humility. Greatness is lowering yourself. Greatness is serving. Greatness is treating others as more important no matter who they are.

That's the lesson Jesus wanted to teach to his disciples and that's what he modeled day in and day out. He was the greatest man to ever walk this earth in terms of power and position, yet he humbled himself and served everyone who came to him – men, women, children, young and old, rich and poor, healthy and sick, the famous and forgotten. And the greatest demonstration of his greatness was what the disciples had such a hard time hearing, it was when he served us all by dying on the cross. He lowered himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. That's true greatness.

Greatness is a good thing, but we have to understand what greatness means or we'll go in the opposite direction of where Christ wants us to go. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 20:25-28: *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, <sup>28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

How have you been pursuing greatness in your life? Being the best? Coming out on top? Succeeding more than others? Those aren't necessarily bad things and I do think that Jesus wants us to do things with excellence. But those aren't ever going to make you great. Greatness comes through humility and service and becoming more like Christ who served us faithfully even to the point of death.