

# The Greatest is the Least

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Preacher: Joshua Winters

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, last Sunday we heard about the kerfuffle which took place right after Jesus' transfiguration. Jesus came down the mountain with Peter, James, and John to find his other nine disciples in a dispute with the teachers of the law about why they couldn't cast a demon out from a man's son.

It was an evil spirit that threw this boy into convulsions and caused him to foam at the mouth. And the spirit had even tried on occasion to kill him.

And we heard about how Jesus commanded the demon to come out, and it did. And Luke concluded that story with these words. They were all amazed at the greatness of God.

Well, let's continue on here in Luke chapter 9. While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, He said to His disciples, Listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you.

The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them so that they did not grasp it.

[ 1 : 19 ] And they were afraid to ask Him about it. This is now the second reminder from Jesus about what is soon to happen.

Jesus already told them once. We just heard that back up in verse 22. We can just go back up and look at that. He already told them, The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law.

And He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. This second time Jesus says it just a little differently. He says, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.

And these words of Luke are actually just a bit of a summary of the fuller statement, which we read in Matthew 17. There Jesus is recorded to say, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.

They will kill Him. And on the third day, He will be raised to life. And the disciples were filled with grief. Some translations say that they were deeply distressed.

[ 2 : 35 ] So they seem to understand that something bad is going to happen. They're deeply distressed or unsettled. Jesus is talking about being killed for the second time.

But Luke's emphasis here is that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus meant. It was hidden from them so that they did not grasp it.

And they were afraid to ask Him about it. I got thinking about this. It's so obvious to us what Jesus is referring to when He says these things. That the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.

We can just flip our Bibles ahead to chapter 22 and start reading. And we read about how Jesus was handed over. How He was betrayed by Judas to the religious leaders in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We read about how Jesus was killed not long after that. But we have to remember at this point in the story that Jesus' disciples had no knowledge of this.

[ 3 : 44 ] They didn't know how it was going to unfold. It hadn't happened yet. Judas hadn't even decided yet to hand Jesus over to betray Him.

And so no wonder they didn't understand what He meant. Luke says it was hidden from them so that they did not grasp it. And I know I have some questions about that.

What does that mean? Why was it hidden from them? Is it God that hid it from them? Or is that a figure of speech to say that it was just beyond their sight? And why were they afraid to ask Jesus about it?

Was it because it just sounded so terrible? Or was it because the last time Jesus had said something like this Peter tried to suggest that that's not how it's going to go and then he got rebuked

by Jesus?

Was that fresh in their memories? And then in the mix of all this there's this secret that Peter and James and John are keeping from the other nine disciples.

[ 4 : 48 ] They, just the day before, saw Jesus' glory on the mountain. They heard the voice of God say that Jesus was His Son and His chosen one.

And I'm thinking it's pretty hard to imagine after hearing and seeing that how there can be any delivering over of Him to the hands of men and killing of Him.

At this point Luke jumps to something that seems totally unrelated. Verse 46 An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.

If we read Mark's Gospel we learn that this argument actually happened between Jesus' disciples while they were walking towards the town of Capernaum. And it's when they get to Capernaum they're in the house together Jesus asked them what they were arguing about on the road.

We get this picture that maybe Jesus was just walking with one of them and the rest of them are either behind or ahead and they're having this squabble. So Jesus asked them what were you guys arguing about?

[ 6 : 06 ] And Mark tells us that the disciples didn't want to say anything at first. They all kept silent about this because they had argued about who was the greatest of them.

Why would they be arguing about that? Well we don't know exactly what they're thinking but we've got to use our imagination sometimes to flesh it out a bit.

Maybe Peter and James and John were thinking pretty highly of themselves after what they just saw on the mountaintop. something that the others didn't get to see.

Why would Jesus have taken only us three? Maybe we're special. Maybe we have a special role to play in the kingdom. This is just me imagining.

But you know boasting and comparing ourselves to others is natural right? I mean maybe we look at this and we think well how childish of them.

[ 7 : 08 ] arguing about which of them was the greatest? That's immature. We never do that do we? Well maybe we've just learned to keep our proud thoughts to ourselves or to share them only with those that we know closely our friends our family.

But no let's be honest we see this kind of pride all the time in our world. I hesitate to use this example but can Donald Trump even talk for five minutes without saying the word great or greatest about America or something that he's working on.

But then think back to the disciples. Jesus really did choose them. These twelve guys they were chosen by the Messiah himself and I don't know maybe they're falling asleep at night thinking about what their role could be in the kingdom of God once Jesus marches into Jerusalem and takes charge.

Like will I be an important regional ruler over here? Or maybe I'll be in charge of the economy. Or military strategy and pure procurement.

If I had my pick what would it be to do in the kingdom of Jesus? Maybe second in command to him.

[ 8 : 42 ] You can only imagine them talking on the road. You know what will this be like? This is so exciting. Generations of our people have longed for this moment and here it is the Messiah has come.

Well one thing's for sure Andrew I'm going to have a higher position in the kingdom than you. Oh yeah? Well what about that time that Jesus called you Satan Peter?

Well when James and John and I were up on the mountain we saw something so amazing but we can't tell you because Jesus told us not to. And besides I was the first to say that Jesus was the Messiah.

Oh come on Simon I was the one who first introduced you to Jesus even before you had your eye on him I had him pegged as the Messiah. I don't know we can only imagine how they thought and how they argued over which of them was the greatest and they knew it was prideful why else would they keep silent when Jesus asked them what they were talking about?

Well Jesus turns this whole thing into a teachable moment. We read in Luke 9 verse 47 Jesus knowing their thoughts took a little child and had him stand beside him.

[ 10 : 11 ] 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.

So Jesus basically says let's talk about this who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? you guys are thinking about greatness all wrong.

You've got it all backwards. In Matthew's gospel we get a little more of the conversation. He said truly I tell you unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

therefore whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

So their ideas about greatness were all wrong. It's not about strength or skill or accomplishment or position or authority or popularity or intelligence.

[ 11 : 45 ] It's not about who gets first place. Those things do define greatness in the eyes of our world but not in the eyes of God.

Not in the eyes of King Jesus. It must have been an absolute shock to see Jesus have this little child come up and take the attention in front of them all and hear him say this child is greater than all of you.

And if you want even to enter my kingdom you all need to change and become more like him. Back in those days children were often looked down on even more so today they still are today but for all the same reasons I mean what can they do?

What have they accomplished with their lives? What can they contribute? Because of their weakness and their neediness and their dependence they take more than they give.

And so according to the world's view of greatness they're worth far less than an accomplished strong and successful adult. But Jesus says no no no no that thinking is all wrong.

[ 13 : 11 ] True greatness in God's kingdom is not about what you have done or how self-sufficient you are or how smart you are or what title you have.

It's about character. It's about humility. It's about understanding yourself rightly in relation to others and how you treat others.

There's a lowliness and a humility that children have. Little children. Not because they lack pride and selfishness but because they have an understanding of their own need and dependence.

When they fall and hurt themselves what do they do? They run to mom and dad. When they don't know something what do they do? They ask mom or dad.

They sort of know their dependence and need and how do they get the things that they need? Not by their own power, not by their own work.

[ 14 : 18 ] They look to mom or dad. How do they get the pickle jar open or the toothpaste out of the bottom of the tube? They just know that they can't but mom can or dad can until they ask for help.

They sort of accept their lowliness in the family. I mean after all my dad is twice as tall as me. His arm is twice as long as mine and he can just pick my whole body off the ground and throw me up in the air like a feather.

Peter. And so Jesus is saying if you think that the path to greatness is going around saying I am Peter.

Hear me roar. You've got it all wrong. You need to become more like a child. And this sort of upside down truth of greatness in God's kingdom isn't actually a new thing.

I mean even in the Old Testament times we see it. God has been saying it. He's been showing it all along. He is a God who humbles the proud and lifts up the lowly.

[ 15 : 29 ] He esteems the lowly. And so Jesus is basically saying guys if you want to enter my kingdom and be great you need to consider yourself to be the least.

You need to humble yourselves. You need to stop wondering who will serve you. and start serving others. And it seems that in this moment the child with Jesus actually becomes an example in another way of what true greatness looks like in the kingdom of God.

First it was his humility and his position which Jesus highlighted as an example. But then Jesus makes it practical for them.

He basically says you become greatest in God's eyes by becoming the servant of the least in your eyes. And the child represents the least here.

I'm not sure if the disciples are even tracking with Jesus here but I'm sure if they did it was pretty shocking to hear this as well. I'm trying to think of the modern way of saying this.

[ 16 : 47 ] Maybe something like the great people of our day are not the presidents and prime ministers nor the wealthy and successful business owners. No the great people of our day are the

ones who get down on the floor to change their children's dirty diapers.

they are those who are the greatest. Those who serve the least in my name.

You want to be great in the kingdom of God? Serve the least. Welcome the least in my name. Begin seeing the least as God sees them.

in Jesus' eyes the children are not insignificant. Serving them and meeting their needs is greatness.

You want to do something great for me Peter? How about you start by welcoming a child such as this in my name? Has anyone greeted this little one since he slipped in the door?

[ 17 : 59 ] Peter? I take how you treat a child such as this personally.

If you welcome a child like this in my name, you welcome me. Matthew's gospel really goes on at this point to emphasize Jesus' heart for children.

his fierce protective heart for them. How he takes personally not only the good things that we do to them, but the ways that we might take advantage of them or cause them to stumble.

He takes those things personally as well. All too often we're looking for the glorious and the glamorous. We're looking for the attention.

We're looking for control. We're looking for position. we're looking to be served by others. We want to know what the compensation will be, what the benefit to ourselves will be, but none of those things are the immediate reward for serving the least.

[ 19 : 15 ] As I got thinking about our little church here, I wondered, who might Jesus say is the greatest among us? would he pull the children right up onto the stage and point us to them?

Or how about those who have spent countless hours behind the scenes cleaning the church toilets, picking up after us each week? Probably the ones who think the least of themselves, and yet serve faithfully as they're able, week after week.

I feel convicted again. I see in my own understanding of greatness far too much of the disciples' attitude, and not nearly enough of this heart to serve the least.

How often do we roll the eyes or sigh deeply when someone whom we've helped a lot, calls again? How often do we grumble and complain that we've been stuck with looking after someone who's unable to look after themselves?

How often do we look out at others and see them living the good life and going on their next trip or adventure and feel envy inside that all our time is wrapped up in serving the needy around us?

[ 20 : 47 ] But no, says Jesus, that's all backwards. Lovingly serving the least is the great and noble life, for it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.

Master, said John, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he's not one of us. Do you ever feel like you're really working to explain something to someone and they just aren't hearing you?

This verse kind of feels like that to me. Jesus is trying to teach him about greatness and the importance of serving the least and what does John latch onto? He latches onto that part about doing something in Jesus' name.

Oh yeah, that reminds me, Jesus. We saw somebody doing something in your name. He was trying to cast out demons in your name so we told him to stop because he's not one of us.

And I'm not really sure where John's coming from here. Is he feeling convicted that maybe he shouldn't have tried to stop him? Or is he feeling proud of what they did because this guy wasn't one of them?

[ 22 : 06 ] Whatever the case, you can sort of hear the territorialism in what they did. Like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on a second, Bub. Only us twelve have been given authority and power to be doing this, to be using Jesus' name in this way.

You haven't even been with us. Where have you been? It's almost like they wanted exclusive rights to use the name of Jesus. Like, this authority and this power had gone to their heads.

never mind that this guy is trying to do something good to set someone free from an evil spirit's control. It seems to be another example of the disciples' pride and their concern for power and position rather than to serve the least.

Do not stop him, Jesus said, for whoever is not against you is for you. Mark has a little more detail here.

For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me. For whoever is not against us is for us. Truly, I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

[ 23 : 33 ] There's a huge irony here. just before this, nine of the twelve disciples had been asked to drive out a demon but couldn't because of their lack of faith.

And yet somewhere, this guy, they run into him, he's not even part of the crowd that's been following Jesus but he has faith in Jesus' name. He believes that Jesus' name has the power to heal and to cast out evil spirits.

and yet the disciples try to stop him. Like, what was this? This entitlement?

I don't know. Hey, buddy, if you want to be doing this, you need to come and hang out with us and with Jesus for a while. You need to work your way up and put in your time like we have and then get Jesus' permission to do stuff like this.

Well, Jesus just burst that whole bubble pretty quickly. Don't stop him. If he's doing this in my name, that means he has faith in me. That means that he's truly one of us.

[ 24 : 45 ] The kingdom of God is going to be bigger than just you 12. But one of the big questions that that raises, and we should just mention it at least, is whether Jesus gives this authority and power over evil spirits to all of his followers.

So far, it seems like it's just been the 12. But now there's this guy who's casting out demons, and he hasn't even been with them.

We'll see very shortly in the next chapter, Jesus is about to give the same power and authority to a group of about 70 followers and send them out. God and we've talked about this a little bit already. We've seen from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that it's not been given to all to be an apostle or to work miracles or to heal. But what about casting out demons?

Can any Christian do this in faith, just like this man? And I'd love to be able to say definitively one way or the other, but this is something Christians disagree over.

[ 25 : 59 ] Some will say, well, why not? It's Jesus' name that has the power. Would you leave a person in front of you afflicted by a demon and not even try? Others point to the fact that casting out demons is never commanded in any of the letters that the apostles wrote as they gave instructions to the church.

They never said, cast out the demons. Instead, we're told to stand firm and to resist and to put on the full armor of God and to pray. Well, we'll have to leave that without a definite answer for now. Maybe we'll come back to it in chapter 11 when we hear about what Jesus did there. Well, we've touched on a number of things and this is just the way this is written.

There's exorcism, there's doing things in Jesus' name, there's greatness in the kingdom of God, there's serving the least, there's children, and this is just the way Luke's gospel gives it to us, all these things.

He gives us the highlights and the snippets as he draws this portion of his account to a close. And I do want to encourage us all this week to just think about these things that we've heard, especially what Jesus said about greatness and serving the least.

[ 27 : 16 ] But for this morning, we're going to end where we started, with Jesus telling his disciples about how he would soon be delivered over and die. In a sense, this is kind of related to the stuff about greatness too, isn't it?

Jesus is the Son of God. He's the Messiah. He's the one who is radiant with glory on the mountaintop. He himself is the greatest in the kingdom of God.

God. And just like Jesus taught, his greatness is seen in his lowliness. It's seen in how he humbled himself.

It's seen in how he welcomed the children. And how he loved the least. And as the story goes, his greatness is seen in how he humbly allows himself to be bound and delivered into the hands of men.

his greatness is seen in how he surrenders himself to their evil plan to kill him. His greatness is seen in how he willingly gives up his life to be the servant of all.

[ 28 : 40 ] To meet the greatest need which we have, which is atonement for our sins. As far as acts of service go, what Jesus endured to serve us and make atonement for us was as shame-filled and horrible as it gets.

He allowed himself to be falsely accused, to be beaten, to be insulted and mocked, to be stripped naked and exposed publicly.

He allowed himself to be spit on and jeered and to be nailed to a cross and lifted into the air. He went through an agonizing death because that's what was required to meet our spiritual need

of atonement for our sins.

He humbled himself to the uttermost in order to wash us clean of our guilt. And so he is truly the greatest in the kingdom of God and worthy of all praise and honor and glory.

In just a moment we're going to pass out the bread and the cup. And this is to remember him and what he did for us. The bread and the cup represent his body and his blood, his humiliation and his death.

[ 30 : 33 ] If you're visiting with us this morning and you're a believer and a follower of Jesus, then we invite you, we encourage you to partake with us in remembrance of Christ. And if not, then just please let the elements pass you by.

We'll have a few minutes now for quiet prayer and reflection. And then Charles and Simon will come and serve the bread and the cup. And then once you have them in your hand, just hang on to them until everyone has been served.

and then we'll give thanks and we'll partake all together. But let's take those minutes now to remember and to pray quietly in remembrance of our Lord and his great act of love for us.