

A bigger view of faithfulness

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Date: 06 May 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, today's reading is from Luke chapter 9, verses 37 to 50, and it can be found on page 1045 of the Church Bibles.

Luke 9, verse 37. On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child.

And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly lead him. And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.

Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and to bear with you? Bring your son here.

While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

[1 : 13] And all were astonished at the majesty of God. But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, Let these words sink into your ears.

The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men. 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.

An argument arose amongst them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side 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 all of you is the one who is great. 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.

But Jesus said to him, Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you. Andrew, thanks very much for reading.

[2 : 27] Do please keep Luke chapter 9 open on page 1044. And we have prayed already, so let's begin.

And the issue at the heart of Luke chapter 9, verses 37 to 50, is the whole question of power.

Power. Power. And status. And perhaps immediately, for some of us at least, our ears prick up, because we live in a world, don't we, that is obsessed by power, and obsessed by status.

So the Brexit negotiations are all about power, of course, as politicians and countries vie for power and influence. The local elections, just this last week, all about power.

Who's going to win? Read the business section of the newspapers, and that's so often about power between various companies and their rivalry. As, of course, is the sports section.

The finances and the power and the money to succeed in sports. And we've seen, too, haven't we, the abuse of power. What it looks like when men abuse their power.

[3 : 34] Whether it's the gender pay gap or the way in which women are treated in Hollywood.

We've seen Facebook abuse its power. And sadly, the abuse of power happens in church as well.

I noticed last week, the BBC's latest midweek drama, *The Split*, is all about power. The main characters are high-powered female lawyers.

Of course, it's not just out there, is it? We play the power game so often ourselves. We want to be recognised, valued, well-regarded by others, seen as being competent and successful.

And to produce offspring who are just the same. It's what our little corner of London does. As a church, we can want to be well thought of as powerful and successful and impressive.

We want status. And that is why we need to listen to these verses in Luke chapter 9. We've seen already over these last few weeks that Jesus must suffer and die a very lowly and humble death. [4 : 47] And yet that he will return on the final day of history in great power and great glory. And now we see in Luke 9, verse 37 to 50, that that same pattern is essentially a pattern that is to be mirrored by Jesus' disciples.

We will be with him in glory on that final day. But until then, in a world that is obsessed with power and status, Christian discipleship is marked by one thing.

And that is humility. I've stuck it there on the outline on the back of the service sheet. Genuine discipleship, genuine Christian discipleship begins in humility.

And it continues in humility. First of all, discipleship begins in humility. Have a look at verses 37 to 49.

39, rather. On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, Teacher, I beg to you, look at my son, for he is my only child.

[5 : 53] And behold, a spirit seizes him and suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth and chatters him and will hardly leave him. What is a scene, isn't it, of complete desperation?

An only child? And although perhaps to our eyes the symptoms here look similar to leprosy, notice that Dr. Luke, as he gives us his medical notes, so to speak, he puts it down to something far more sinister.

Verse 39, a spirit seizes him. Verse 42, the demon threw him to the ground. Elsewhere, Luke distinguishes illness from demon possession. He's able to distinguish between different kinds of illnesses, fever, leprosy, paralysis, and so on.

Here then, if you like, is a snapshot of all that is wrong with the world. The world in the grip of evil. And the big surprise, and I wondered if you spotted this as Andrea read the passage for us, the really big surprise, I think, comes in verse 40.

As this poor father says to Jesus, I beg your disciples to cast it out, but they could not. Jesus' disciples can't do anything about it. And yet, do you remember how back in chapter 9, verse 1, what we'll be told in chapter 9, verse 1, Jesus called the 12 together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure all diseases.

[7 : 20] So what's going on here in verses 37 to 43? Well, I want to suggest that Luke is deliberately underlining human weakness, that we cannot save ourselves, neither from the problems we face in this world, nor from the problems that we face in the next.

We see it again in verse 41, as Jesus says to the crowds, O faithless and twisted generation, it's an echo of the way in which God described the first exodus generation, way back in the Old Testament, after they had been rescued from Egypt.

How they failed to trust God. How almost as soon as God's back was turned, they worshipped instead a golden calf. It's what all of us are naturally like, spiritually faithless, twisted.

All of us need the salvation and forgiveness of God that is to be found in Jesus Christ. And then again in verse 45, we see the weakness of the disciples, as Jesus says to them, as we are told, they did not understand this saying, and it is concealed from them, so they may not perceive it. Like those disciples, each one of us is naturally lacking spiritual understanding. To have spiritual truth concealed from us is, in the whole Bible, part of what it means to be under the judgment of God.

[8 : 50] Which means, of course, that each of us needs Jesus to help us to see spiritual reality. To see what God is like. To see what we are like.

And then in the middle of all of that comes Jesus' second prediction of his death. Verse 44, It's a shorthand version of what we saw last week.

Verse 22, Jesus' first prediction of his death. The son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. Jesus must suffer. Jesus must die. Do you see how Luke is deliberately putting these things side by side? Human weakness next door to the fact that Jesus must suffer and die.

And that contrast between human weakness and Jesus' power couldn't be sharper, could it, than in verses 42 to 43.

[10:07] While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirits and healed the boy and gave him back to his father.

And all were astonished at the majesty of God. Jesus simply speaks and this evil spirit is cast out. It shows, of course, why Jesus must suffer and be killed to defeat the powers of darkness head on. Despite our technological sophistication, the power of evil, the problem of evil is intractable.

We see it, don't we, in the news every day. We experience it in our own lives. And most of all, I guess, we see it in our own hearts. The Christian life begins with humility, with a recognition that I am weak before God, that I cannot save myself, and I cannot even understand the message of Jesus without his enabling.

And yet, wonderfully, it's in the face of that human weakness that Jesus Christ will die to bring the forgiveness of sins and peace with God. One of the pervasive myths about Jesus in our culture is that Jesus simply died as a kind of moral example, a moral example of what it means to sacrifice ourselves and our lives for others.

[11:42] And therefore, that we are to follow that example. And that's all that Jesus' death did. It was simply a kind of moral example. In which case, I guess we'd expect Luke, wouldn't we, and the rest of the New Testament, to be saying a lot about the goodness of human nature or the potential that is inside each one of us or the inner strength that we have to change.

But actually, there's none of that because we cannot save ourselves. And the death of Jesus Christ was far more than a moral example. It's humbling, isn't it?

Some of us, I know, have elderly relations and relatives and although everyone else can see that they need help, they insist that they don't and they want to carry on doing things to themselves. Why?

Because it's humbling, isn't it, to get to a point of saying, I can't do this myself and I need help. Or perhaps there's been some DIY project that you've taken on, it's been more difficult than you imagined, and yet perhaps like a dog with a bone, you know, you've refused to give up and you've refused to admit defeat because it's humbling when we come across things which we cannot do. And yet to be a disciple of Jesus means coming before Jesus, recognizing our spiritual weakness, that we are sinners, that we cannot save ourselves, humbling ourselves before him, asking him to do for us the one thing that we cannot do, which no one else can do, which is to forgive us and bring us into right relationship with the God who made us.

[13:29] Now I wonder whether that is something you've ever done for yourself. Or perhaps it's this very need to humble yourself before God that actually, if you're honest and if you look into your own heart, you find very, very difficult indeed.

Because like so many of us, you're used to being independent and you're used to being able to do things and sort things out for yourself. And yet the testimony of so many in this room is that it's precisely when we did that, when we humbled ourselves before God, that the turning point came. To confess your sin to God, that you are far from him, that you are not in your heart a good person, that you'll only ever be right with God by trusting in Jesus' death on the cross.

Why, if you've never done that, then today would be a great day to do so. Do come and talk to me at the end about how you might do that. So first up, discipleship begins in humility.

Secondly, discipleship continues in humility. Verse 46. And isn't verse 46 astonishing? An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.

[14:51] Why, it'd be almost comical, wouldn't it, were it not so tragic coming straight after Jesus' second prediction of his death. Perhaps his disciples were still intoxicated by the transfiguration, that glimpse of what Jesus Christ will be in all his power and glory and splendor when he returns on the final judgment day.

And perhaps they're just talking amongst themselves, wanting something of that power and splendor and glory for themselves that will come from following such a Messiah.

It's just worth noticing, by the way, that the fact that Luke doesn't give us a very flattering portrait of Jesus' disciples is, of course, a sign of authenticity.

If Luke had simply made his gospel up rather than using eyewitness accounts as he claims to, or if he'd be made up by the early church, you'd never paint, would you, the disciples in such a negative light?

Instead, I guess, you'd want to sort of portray them as impressive leaders waiting in the wings in the same way that sports personalities or politicians when they come to write their autobiographies do.

[16:08] And you're left in, no doubt, are you, that right from a very early age, you know, from the age of two or two and a half or whatever it is, that actually they were destined for greatness. But there's none of that.

Instead, Luke shows the disciples are slow to understand, proud and self-centered, just like us. And Jesus unmask the power games that we so often play.

First, in verses 47 to 48, what we might call the who's up and who's down game. Have a look at verse 47. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side 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 all of you is the one who is great. Well, it's what all of us do, isn't it, when we are suffering status anxiety.

We establish a hierarchy. hierarchy. And we establish it in such a way to make sure that we are at the top of the hierarchy. It's what happens in primary school.

[17:26] Everyone knows who's best at football. They're the ones who will get all the glory and score the goals, while others will be at the bottom of the pile and they're the ones who have nothing to offer and no status and no one's ever going to pass the ball to them.

But of course, we play the same game, don't we, as adults. It's why whenever you go to a social event, one of the first questions you're asked is, what job do you do? Because it establishes a pecking order.

Who's worth talking to? Who's going to be useful to me? Who isn't? Who will make me feel good about myself? And inevitably, the who's up and who's down game, it makes those of us who are at the bottom of the hierarchy feel rubbish.

Makes us feel as if we don't have much to offer. And yet, wonderfully, Jesus Christ blows that whole system of relating and relationships completely out of the water.

Verse 48, he takes a child as a visual aid. You say to a child at a smart dinner party, what do you do? Well, I play with my toys, I talk to my teddies, I read books.

[18:40] They have minimal status. Jesus, so obviously and so visually making the point that true greatness consists not in exalting yourself, but instead in the lowly service of others.

To serve others in humility, not because of what I'm going to get out of it, not to boost my credentials, but to serve Jesus. because Jesus' kingdom is a place where everyone is valuable. Which means, of course, we must resist the temptation to play that same status game at church, the job we do, our Bible knowledge, how intelligent we are, the gifts we have, because Jesus sets the tone.

The truly great disciple is the one who is lowly in the service of others. It's why, of course, the local church should be the most wonderful community to be part of, because it's so very different from the world around us.

It's why all of us in the church family here need to work hard at making sure Grace Church is this kind of wonderful community of which the Lord Jesus paints a picture, and you might like to chat further over coffee about how we can reflect this more and more in the way in which we relate to one another.

[20:09] The second game we play is in verses 49 to 50, and I've called it the who's in and who's out game. Jesus answered, Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.

But Jesus said to him, do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you. Again, it's a game, isn't it, straight from the school playground, the powerful individual who takes it upon themselves to decide who is in the group and who is not in the group, and depending on whether you have the right phone or the right logo on your clothes or whatever it is, then you are either in the group or you are out of the group.

You can't be in, you must be out. I was talking at a carol service up in the city back in December for one of the city firms, I won't tell you which one, and during the mince pies and mulled wine afterwards, I couldn't help but notice the kind of in crowd all gathering around the CEO of the firm, making it very clear to everyone else, you know, we are the in crowd, and gathering so tightly around that actually everyone else was completely excluded.

A wonderful illustration of the kind of thing the Lord Jesus is speaking about here. We're in, you are out. How easily we play this game.

We make ourselves feel as if we are the real keen followers of Jesus by looking down on others. Now it's important that we're clear what Jesus isn't saying in verse 50.

[21 : 51] Just have a look again at verse 50. Jesus is not saying, notice, that we should welcome anyone and everyone who calls themselves a Christian completely regardless of what they believe.

Because of course that would completely contradict, wouldn't it, what Jesus has already been saying in Luke chapter 9 about what a genuine disciple looks like. So, we've seen a genuine disciple that believes that Jesus is the Christ, God's King.

A genuine disciple believes that Jesus pays the penalty for our sins. and a disciple rather than being some vague profession of faith is someone who denies themselves, takes up their cross and follows Jesus daily in the anticipation of future glory when he returns.

So, Jesus clearly isn't saying and cannot be saying in verse 50 that unless someone explicitly says, I'm not a Christian, that they must belong to Jesus.

And that would be a complete nonsense, wouldn't it, if he was saying that. Instead, it's a warning against the power games and one-upmanship that we can play.

[22 : 59] A party spirit in church that says, I'm in and you are out. Because the core value of God's kingdom is the sacrificial service of others rather than trying to bolster and boost my own credentials.

So, let's finish by thinking through what verses 46 to 50 might look like in practice. Firstly, for us as a church, corporately, together, and secondly, for us individually.

Firstly, as a church, we live, don't we, in a celebrity culture and therefore, I take it that as a church, like every church, our great temptation is we'll want to be, we'll want to look impressive and successful.

And we'll despise the ordinary and the unspectacular. I take it that Ashley will want Christians to be influential in politics and the nation as a whole to look strong and impressive.

And when these things don't happen, then we will question whether things are really going in the right direction. At which point, the alarm bells just need to start ringing.

[24 : 21] In the last month, there have been a number of high-profile Christian leaders in the US who have had to resign because they have abused their positions of power. And of course, it happens in the UK as well.

And yet, for years, in some cases, the problem has been overlooked because in a celebrity culture, of course, it's not just that Christian leaders are tempted to behave like celebrities, churches. It's also that churches will want them to so they can feel good about going to their churches.

Now, I go to So's Church, I go to this church. It makes us feel good about ourselves. Now, we need to keep on saying that Jesus Christ is an unimpressive Savior.

He did not come to establish a powerful-looking kingdom in this world, rather, a powerful kingdom in the next world, which means that the church will likewise look unimpressive in this world.

Secondly, what might this mean for us individually? Well, I take it we will value and prize and treasure the humble service of others, whether it's serving in at Sunday Club, so much of that unseen as we prepare and pray and so on, or serving others in our growth groups, or perhaps opening our hearts and lives to those who are finding life difficult and for whom life is hard.

[25 : 51] And, while so much of that is unseen, nonetheless, it is fantastic as we become aware of some of those things happening and that is a great thing to be encouraging one another to do.

And yet, I wonder if, like me, you can see yourself in verse 46. The desire for greatness and recognition in whatever sphere it is.

When you say, what might that look like played out in practice? Well, I guess it may look like a number of things. But I guess one of the most obvious things is that it might mean that we end up leaving gospel ministry ministry and service to others because it doesn't look very impressive.

I was part of a church many years ago, it's not a church you'll have heard of, outside of London full of people commuting quite a long distance into the city. Their jobs brought them power, prestige, and greatness.

And yet, it was very striking that actually at church, back home, there was a real unwillingness to roll their sleeves up and get stuck in with day-to-day gospel ministry.

[27 : 12] They were happy to pay for others to do it, you know, let's employ another staff member and so on, but unwilling to do it for themselves. And I take it that is at least bound to be one of our temptations here in Dulwich.

Perhaps a reluctance to serve in a particular area of ministry because actually by doing so it's revealing our weaknesses. Whereas actually we're the kind of person who, you know, wants to be competent and wants to be well thought of as we do things.

Or perhaps the temptation is to invest our time and energy and resources in other things, things that make us feel good. Perhaps our career or a home improvement project or something like that which makes us feel good about ourselves compared to which, well, ministry can feel hard and look unimpressive and so on.

It may be that some of us should be considering full time ministry and yet actually we rule it out or we have ruled it out because of its low status in our culture.

At which point we just need to stop, don't we, and ask the question, what is true greatness? And to cast our eyes upon the Lord Jesus, the Great One, God's glorious King from before all eternity, the risen Lord into all eternity, the One who defines true greatness for us.

[28 : 44] Verse 48, for He who is least among all of you is the One who is great. Let's spend some time in reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer.

Let these words sink into your ears. The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for the Lord Jesus, the truly Great One, the One who was in glory from before all eternity, who will be in glory for all eternity, yet the One who in great humility and loneliness came to serve.

They're rejected, suffered, killed for our sins. And we're sorry, Heavenly Father, when so often we want greatness and status for ourselves and we pray that you'd help us to take these words of the Lord Jesus to heart as we recognize our own spiritual weakness, that we would humble ourselves again before you and that we would be those who serve and live as your disciples in humility. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.