

# Luke 9:37-50 - True Greatness

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Preacher: Will Spink

[ 0 : 00 ] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Jesus, what a beautiful reminder of your invitation to us. And so here we are this morning. We have come to you.

We have come to you, Jesus, from a lot of life that has been happening. Some of it deeply painful. Some of it richly joyful. Some of it we are just unsure what is happening. We are confused. All of us, Jesus, need you.

So Father, we come to your word this morning. And our prayer is that you would show us Jesus. He's the one we need. Would you speak to us clearly by your word and by your spirit that we might see him and know him more.

[ 1 : 07 ] We ask it in his name. Amen. Before we read our passage in the Gospel of Luke as we make our journey through Luke, before I read that passage this morning, let me tell you about something that happened at our house this week as I was working on this sermon.

Wednesday night, about 10.30 in the evening, past all of our bedtimes, and we felt that. The head of a significant governmental agency, a really important guy in high demand by lots of other really important people, crawled out from underneath our refrigerator.

He had dust in his hair, dirty magnets stuck to his legs. You'd never suspected if you saw him there and didn't know him that he would be sitting in high-level government meetings the next day.

It's not what it looked like. But that wasn't what made him great to us Wednesday night, that he would be in important meetings the next day. It didn't matter that he could put a man on the moon. We had a room temperature refrigerator. And we were just thankful he was a neighbor, a friend, a deacon in our church who was willing to help out a pastor with a warm fridge.

[ 2 : 31 ] It made me think of the reality TV show, Undercover Boss. You may have seen an episode of that before. If you haven't, it's a fairly simple concept. The premise is that a business executive disguises himself as an entry-level employee.

And he works alongside those other entry-level employees to see how things are really going in the trenches, so to speak. And they don't know who he is. They don't recognize him, of course, without the pinstripe suit and the corner office and the fancy, impressive title.

The employees don't even know how great, how important these guys really are until they reveal their true identity, of course. The things that would usually make this guy great in the eyes of the minimum wage employees are disguised.

They miss out on his greatness. And that's a little bit of what the disciples are about to experience in our passage this morning. And remember that as I read it, that the glory and greatness of Jesus has been on full display in his transfiguration, as Ron so powerfully helped us see last Sunday.

And Jesus walks right off the mountain where he has been transfigured, only to have his disciples miss his greatness on a number of levels. We'll see how easy that is for us to do too.

[ 3 : 58 ] So look for that as I read for us Luke 9, beginning at verse 37. Luke 9 at 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 leave him.

And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not. Jesus answered, Oh, faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and 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.

And all were astonished at the greatness 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.

[ 5 : 06 ] 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 among 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 you all 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. Thus far, God's inspired, inerrant, infallible word.

Luke is tying together for us in this passage that I just read four brief scenes. They all happen together even though sometimes there's a disconnect from one to the other.

[ 6 : 21 ] And it begins with this casting out of a demon from a young boy. And what I particularly, particularly, yeah, easy for you to say. What I particularly love about this here is the way God shows us Jesus' greatness on display as he stoops to engage a painful world.

Recall, it's just the night before that he's been up on the mountain. His transfiguration, there he is with his clothes shining white. His glory and greatness is everywhere.

His face is dazzlingly brilliant. Moses and Elijah come to visit with him. They talk together. It's so glorious, in fact, that Peter, one of the three who's witnessing it, just wants him to stay there, doesn't he?

Just, oh, leave it just like this. This is perfect. So much so, Peter writes about it in his epistle years later, about being an eyewitness in that moment to the greatness of Jesus.

His majesty, his glory. But here in this passage, as he walks down the mountain, Jesus shows us that part of his greatness is connecting that glory of heaven to the pain of earth.

[ 7 : 39 ] He walks right down, out of the mountain, into the crowd. He engages a desperate man about his troubled son that no one seems to be able to help.

And he casts the demon out, completely healing him, restoring him to his father. Look at verse 43. All were astonished at the greatness of God.

They see what Jesus has done, casting out this demon immediately and completely. And they're astonished. They're marveling at the greatness of God.

Your translation may say the majesty of God. Many say greatness, which is a good translation and is helpful here in this context. But it's actually the same Greek word that Peter uses in his epistle for what happened in the transfiguration.

I saw the greatness of God on the mountain. And now all the people say, not just the three of them got to see God's greatness. All of us got to see God's greatness down here in the midst of us, entering into their broken, ordinary lives.

[ 8 : 56 ] You see, the greatness of Jesus comes particularly in that his glory moves toward our pain. He stoops, doesn't he? He bends.

He enters into our weakness almost undercover. And he demonstrates with this young boy that his greatness in connecting his glory with our lowliness.

Don't you love how he does that? How he meets us right there when your life is broken and painful and normal. And he shows up. A wonderful deed casting out this demon.

But while the crowds are marveling at that great deed, Jesus has something to say that will affirm in his words the importance of his glory stooping to us.

Verse 44. Let these words sink into your ears, Jesus says to his disciples. The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.

[ 10 : 02 ] Listen, Jesus says, I've got something really important to tell you, disciples. You've got to understand this. Let it sink into your ears. You've got to know that my greatness is not merely in dazzling clothes or powerful, impressive deeds.

But it's in my coming to die. We just saw last week, didn't we, that heaven is talking about Jesus' upcoming death. What did Moses and Elijah show up at the transfiguration?

What do they talk with Jesus about? What? His exodus. His upcoming departure. That they're all interested in that. That's how central it is to the mission of Jesus that he go to a cross and suffer

and die.

It's going to keep coming up over and over in Luke because Jesus doesn't lose sight of the centrality of the cross to what he's come to do. But just notice for right now, Jesus connects the glory of God not only to the pain of our world and of our lives but also to his death itself.

His greatness will be on display when he dies. That's hard for us to understand. Perhaps it was once again very confusing to his disciples.

[11:22] They've been very close to the greatness of Jesus, haven't they? They've seen a lot, they've heard a lot but again, they're missing it. They aren't going to act in ways that befit people who grasp the glory of Jesus, his worth, his majesty, his glory, his greatness.

They're not going to act like people who remember that. Do you know what that's like? Have you ever wondered why you seem to forget or not live as though you remember the greatness and the glory of Jesus?

Maybe you've sat in a sermon like the one Ron preached last Sunday and seen the glory of Jesus and how Jesus welcomes us into the presence of God and you've thought, oh, that's so beautiful. I see Jesus as this glorious savior and only to find yourself the next day anxious and fearful and feeling abandoned by God that he's not with you, he's left you alone.

You've thought during the sermon, I just want to see the name of Jesus made great. It doesn't matter what people think of me, only to find yourself that afternoon running someone else down so that you can step on them and look better to your friends.

[12:48] Jesus. Maybe like me, some of you got to hear a missionary report Monday night. Many of us were there and got to hear these great stories of what God is doing in the Middle East and maybe you sat in there in that meeting and you thought, yes, Jesus is so precious.

I want the whole world to know and be transformed by my great savior. That's the best thing that could possibly happen. only to find yourself the next day unwilling to even bring Jesus up with your neighbor again in that conversation.

Maybe you've been on a retreat or at a camp and had this mountaintop experience where you think, this is going to be life changing. I'm going to live for Jesus in every way.

But a couple weeks later, things seem to go back to the same routines. You find yourself living the way you always have for yourself. Maybe you've grown up in church.

Maybe you've been around church people a long time and you've always heard Jesus was worth following in all of your life only to feel the tug of friends or the tug of money or the tug of success pulling you toward unbelief and disobedience.

[14:12] whatever the situation may be different for you but you've seen and felt the greatness of Jesus. Right? But then you've gone later and it just seems not to stick.

It doesn't seem to transform you. It doesn't seem to matter very long in your life. well then you and I can empathize with the disciples because they're going to show us that Jesus' greatness is missed by what I'll call wannabe great disciples.

My word not in the text. Wannabe great disciples. See it's our obsession with our own greatness and our misunderstanding of true greatness that causes us to miss the greatness of Jesus.

See if you can find yourself in the disciples here like I can. First they're self-reliant. You may not remember at the beginning of this chapter it's actually verse 1 when Jesus gave his disciples power and authority over all demons.

But what does Jesus find out from this man just a little while later? Verse 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out but they could not.

[15:33] They had authority given to them by Jesus over all demons but they couldn't cast one out of my son. And Jesus' response when he learns that is to say particularly of the disciples although probably not just applying to them oh faithless and twisted generation how long am I to be with you and bear with you?

Jesus says to his disciples you haven't been believing me and living by faith in me faithless faithless generation you're trying to function on your own you've stopped trusting me now Jesus hasn't given you and me the same direct power over demons that he gave here in Luke 9 to his disciples but we've struggled to trust him too haven't we?

There have been times in our lives where we've stopped trusting him we think only of what we can do in our own strength we hesitate to risk looking bad we live as though the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit is not present with us all the time and in every situation as though we're on our own

then we see the disciples fear look at verse 45 after Jesus says these really important things to them about his upcoming death they don't understand it's concealed from them so that they might not perceive it and they were afraid to ask him about this saying they're confused yes blinded in some way yes but ultimately they're fearful to push through to understand something that Jesus has just said is clearly very important and it's not the first time he's said it to them and it's not the first time he's told them how vital it is that they understand about this but they're too afraid they're not willing to push through the fear to ask and why well even more sadly in this passage among other reasons that they're too afraid it's because they're actually focused on one-upping each other aren't they if you keep reading you find out they're concerned about their own relative greatness which one of us is the best they're afraid to understand more of what

Jesus means by his downward path to greatness but they're not afraid to argue about their own greatness are they that's the way the passage sets this up to say to take up an argument among themselves who's the greatest what do you think out of the twelve of us a competitive spirit rears its ugly head and the closest followers of Jesus I don't know what they said my theology is better than yours maybe or I saw Jesus shining brightly and you weren't even there what an amazing experience you've never seen anything to match it and another guy who wasn't up there on the mountain says you were just watching I cast out ten demons healed a dozen people at one time while you were just watching it's not very impressive anybody can watch and another one says well I'm the one who always does the talking while you guys are just around doing crowd control whose role is more important

I'm not sure what they said but in their competition with each other what's clear is they lost track of Jesus greatness hadn't they they weren't thinking about him anymore they were focused on themselves those of you who know me know I can turn just about anything into a competition get so focused on myself that I just want to be better than you at whatever it is and I lose sight of Jesus greatness because mine seems so important in fact the disciples self obsession here is so bad that even when Jesus redirects them to true greatness which we'll look at in a moment John won't let it go verse 49 John answered which is kind of a funny word because Jesus didn't ask a question and it doesn't seem to fit with what Jesus was saying that's that's the argument

[ 20 : 06 ] John answered we saw someone casting out demons in your name like we weren't able to do real well but there was someone else and he was doing it and using your name and we said stop we told him to stop because he doesn't follow with us he was not one of us Jesus says no you've got it wrong again don't stop him the one who's not against you is for you John says yeah Jesus I hear what you're saying about greatness but let me get back to the point you know how we weren't able to cast out the demon well there's this other guy who was casting out demons and we told him to stop because only 12 people are authorized to use your name and he wasn't one of them John didn't want anybody else getting in on his glory did he self seeking looking out for himself defending his reputation at all costs and Jesus again has to tell him he's missed the boat it's not about you John or the other guy it's his name that was being used it's

Jesus name and reputation that matters right boy even within the church we can get competitive and self serving can't we we begin to define spiritual greatness by who gets the title who gets asked to teach who gets into the in small group which is mine of course whose kids are better behaved at VBS and makes you look like the great parent and we get caught up on all these trivial disagreements and rankings of people and what happens a lot of things happen but actually we don't even realize the worst thing that happens what happens is we miss the greatness of Jesus we started to look for greatness right here in ourselves all of a sudden we're not willing for our names to be small so that his name can be great because we can't risk falling behind someone else I wish it was only the disciples who did this don't you wish it was just those who hung around Jesus and really saw his greatness who struggled but since then we've kind of figured it out but think if John witnessed the transfiguration he was one of those three right if he witnessed the greatness the majesty of Jesus and then says something this self serving and self focused we could most certainly hear this sermon and do something equally self serving equally missing the impact of the greatness of Jesus and see Jesus has come to redefine greatness he looks at it entirely differently in his kingdom let me tell you about children in Jesus culture and then we'll read what he says one more time see in Jesus day status was so significant in his culture what you did was largely defined by your greatness or your lack thereof greatness impacted where you lived it impacted what you wore whom you ate with where you sat in church the great people got all these front pews so they

must not be here this morning but

I'm sure you'll all be here next week that really that's what it was everywhere you went you could see who was great you just looked where were they sitting who were they with how were they dressed and you knew what greatness was there was a ranking in society and your greatness or lack thereof defined you in many ways children lacked greatness in that culture it was different from ours where in little children here they were the lowest worthless insignificant and Jesus turns to these grown men who are arguing about who is the greatest among them and Jesus knowing the reasoning of their hearts verse 47 took a child and put him by his side and said to 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

Jesus takes the lowest and elevates it to a position of honor at his side right here's Jesus standing there with his arm around this young boy he's done this before with women with the poor with Gentiles and now he does it with a child and says here's what greatness would look like a great person would welcome this child now remember children did the welcoming they were never welcomed because you only welcomed someone who ranked above you children didn't rank above you the lesser always welcomed the greater and Jesus said the one who would be great would welcome this little child Jesus is redefining greatness he's not merely elevating children the point is not just children are wonderful he's elevating humility an upside down topsy turvy concept of greatness the end of verse 48 he who is least among you all is the one who is great greatness in [ 25 : 55 ] Jesus kingdom is not like greatness in society you have to get lower not higher so how do we need to think differently about greatness in Jesus kingdom it's not who has the title the position the influence the remarkable gifts that can't be the measure of greatness for us anymore can it that's distinctly what Jesus says it's not I grabbed some snapshots of kingdom greatness around Southwood that were going to be up there on that screen before we had some of our technical difficulties this morning I think what happened is that God didn't even want them to get that much greatness and even for you to see some of the people I'm about to talk about so now you just have to imagine as I beautifully describe the pictures that are not there kingdom greatness would be teaching little toddlers to pat the Bible in a room that no one else sees so they know

Jesus loves them kingdom greatness would be praying in an empty prayer room at Lincoln Village that God would transform a neighborhood or the widow who prays at home every Sunday during the sermon that we would hear God speak and when you come to church needing to hear the voice of God I'd say Jesus would suggest what she's doing is more important than what the preacher is doing towards your hearing God's voice in his word kingdom greatness would be paying hundreds of dollars and two weeks of work for the privilege of going to Ica Peru where no one else goes because they don't matter to hug an orphaned boy until he feels how much God values him kingdom greatness would be planning your business or planning your free time to help those most in need who can't help themselves and can't make you look good to walk up behind someone and may make some one way or a and maybe it's why one of our core commitments here at Southwood is loving the least the lost the littlest, the lonely, and the left out. It's because those are not often prized by our culture.

Jesus says that's what his kingdom should look like, is loving their, valuing them. It's an upside down value system in our culture. It doesn't make sense. No one else promotes it, but Jesus does. Are you surprised that Jesus has a different definition of greatness from the one that our society would elevate as valuable or that we would naturally gravitate towards? You're shocked that Jesus would contradict your natural sensibilities? By now we shouldn't be.

He's done this over and over. He says my kingdom is different. It's upside down in many ways from what you expect and from what the world values. He redefines true greatness in his kingdom. And the question for us is which system for greatness do we pursue? Which path to greatness are we on?

[ 30 : 01 ] Are we seeking to follow? Jesus redefines true greatness. But actually I don't believe that's Jesus' primary goal here to tell his disciples how to be great.

Just think back to the scene. Imagine what he's not doing. He's not saying, hey guys, I love this argument you're having. Let me tell you how to win it. You need to go off and find some little kids and do some things with them and then come back and you'll have the trump card to play on the other guys.

Hey, look what I've done for all these kids. I'm showing you how to win the argument so come back. You think that's Jesus' primary point? Is that the goal of what he's saying to the disciples when he brings the child over to him? That's not the primary point, is it? He is showing us how to live in his kingdom. We shouldn't miss that. But that's not the first thing. He's not saying it primarily so you can be great. Think of it that way. He's not saying these things primarily so you can be great, but so you can recognize the greatness of Jesus. Even more importantly, even before you think about what it means for me to be great, Jesus wants you to see his true greatness. Compared to the transfiguration, Jesus is here in the lives of the people in this story and in our lives as an undercover boss.

His true greatness is disguised way beyond any TV show switch and an executive being an entry-level employee. He's here not dazzling in all his shining glory that they've seen, but entering into the painful and the normal. Just in this passage alone, what do we see referenced? The perfect creator suffers some of the pains of his broken creation. The divine ruler of all, the one who's in charge of everybody, will be delivered into the hands of men under the influence of men that he created and he should rule over. The very Lord of life will die. You're going to miss his greatness in those moments. In those moments, it's going to be really easy to miss his greatness. In those mundane or difficult moments in our lives, it's so easy to miss his greatness, especially if we don't know what true greatness is.

And missing his greatness, y'all, would be much more devastating than not being great yourself. That's what's on his heart. Missing his greatness would be so much worse than just not knowing how to be great yourself. Jesus is teaching us what true greatness is primarily so that we will recognize it in him. Jesus is calling his followers. Take your eyes off yourself and your own pursuit of greatness so you see your great Savior. See in the one who leaves the glory of heaven to enter your brokenness and pain, your great Savior. See in the one who kneels, washes feet, suffers, and dies to welcome little children like you and me into his home. That's why he kneels. That's why he stoops. That's why he bends. It's to welcome you home and see in him your great Savior. Let's pray.

[ 34 : 01 ] Father, we thank you for our great Savior. We've seen him as glorious before. Father, write the truth of who he is, the beauty and glory of his name on each of our hearts. We're so prone to be like the disciples.

We confess that to you this morning that we so easily focus on our own greatness. We so easily miss the greatness of Jesus that is right there near us.

Thank you, Jesus, for entering into the pain of our lives. Thank you, Jesus. Even when we can't recognize you. Even when we don't know how great you are.

Thank you for welcoming us home. Would you be more beautiful in our eyes this week? Would you be greater that we would not only see you as great, but that we would then begin to reflect just a little bit of what true greatness looks like as we follow you downward and to serve the least.

Make our hearts willing and eager to meet you there. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at [southwood.org](http://southwood.org).