

March 17, 2019
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
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TRUE GREATNESS Luke 9:46-56

It is likely that Isaiah 14:12-14 is a reference to Satan. The reference in Ezekiel 28:13-19 is doubtless a reference to Satan, the spiritual power behind the actual king of Tyre. God created Satan to with all splendor and glory (Ezekiel 28:13). He was the anointed guardian cherub, the first of all created divine beings (28:14). He was blameless, living in the Garden of God, until unrighteousness was found in him (28:15). And when Satan embraced unrighteousness, he became proud and corrupted his God-given wisdom (28:17).

At that point in history, Satan rebelled against God, choosing to exalt himself to a position of greatness even to replace God Himself. *“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High’”* (Isaiah 14:12-14).

It appears that very shortly Satan attacked man and woman who God made in His image, he tempted them to follow his pernicious path of destruction by encouraging them to be more than God intended for them to be. Stepping over God’s clearly stated boundaries Satan tempted, *“You will not surely die! For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”* (Genesis 3:4b-5). Adam and Eve succumbed to Satan’s temptation to try to be as great as God and rebelled against God.

And since that day, every human has been born with that same rebellion resident in our hearts. We are so easily dissatisfied. Too

often we do not agree with God’s design for us and long to be someone, something different than what God created. Most of us have way too much of that desire to be greater straining at that fences of our soul trying to burst out into reality.

On one hand, the ceaseless striving to be greater has made life quite comfortable for humanity. How could humans have achieved all the common conveniences of life that make our lives easier, better, more pleasant apart from a striving for greatness. In fact, it is a holy dissatisfaction with the status quo that drives us to know and experience a deeper relationship with our Creator and Savior.

Yes, but more often than not, the stimulation toward greatness is nothing less than pride. We just naturally want to be better. Better than what? Better than the next person. Greatness is determined by comparison. On one hand, there is a tendency to make everyone mediocre so that no one appears to be greater. That is like a sports competition where everyone is a winner, everyone gets a trophy. Human nature knows that is utter foolishness. On the other hand, there can be such a desire to be better than the next guy that people will despise, bully, reject, and even harm anyone who gets in the way of their journey toward perceived greatness.

Maybe you never struggle with this very natural sin. The disciples did. I do. The men who were closest to Jesus had visions of leadership positions and cabinet seats in what they perceived would be the kingdom of Israel Jesus reestablished. This caused them to be very narrow in their view of kingdom work. In their opinion, only the select few (them) should be engaged in kingdom work. And certainly, they were the only ones who could do it right (in their humble opinions). Furthermore, if anyone appeared to resist the coming King and His kingdom, they should be consumed by fire from heaven immediately.

In the three examples of our text, Jesus taught three important lessons about the natural problem of seeking greatness. He taught that true greatness is not to supercede, subjugate, or run over our peers. True greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven is to be found living as humble servants of Christ—which means we will serve others.

Which of Us is Greatest (vv.46-48)?

There was a question about greatness. Luke tells us that *an argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest (v.46)*. An argument implies difference of opinion. We know from real life that like our text says, arguments tend to “arise.” For example, here are two people or a group of people who appear to be getting along just fine. Then something happens—an issue comes up or the people face a particular circumstance about which they disagree. Why do people disagree?

It is human nature to establish personal preferences based on our personalities and experiences. Ultimately, these conflicts will arise because of pride. So in the case of the disciples, this argument arose, possibly started from a simple question like, “Why did Jesus take Peter, James, and John to see His glory on the mountain?” Some possible answers might have been “He likes us best.” Or maybe one of the three could have responded, “He is going to appoint us to the chief seats in the kingdom cabinet.” Or “He is going to give us the greatest responsibility.” But at the same time, one of the other disciples could have easily responded, “No! He took you with Him because He didn’t trust you to be out of His sight!”

The fact is that Peter, James, and John did occupy a more special position of Christ’s favor than the other nine. The fact is that Jesus chose to use those three apostles as the chief building blocks of the Church He is building. Jesus, being the head of the Church, is free to exercise that prerogative. If someone wanted to argue about greatness, they should have argued with Jesus.

The arguments that arise in our day often take the form of how we show our love for Christ and His work. We often hear arguments that wonder, “Whose theological idiosyncracies honor Christ most, mine or yours?” Or “Which kind of worship used in churches today really exalts God’s majesty?” Or “Which English version of the Bible does God use?” Notice that this argument turns on what is meant by “greatest.” When we know what constitutes greatness, we will know how to answer it and defuse the argument.

A sad statement is that the argument was among “them.” Not just among the followers of Jesus, but among the disciples closest to Jesus. These men should have been in the process of being conformed

to Jesus’s character. If they were actually becoming like the Teacher of righteousness, they would have realized how foolish and childish their argument was. These were men who Jesus chose specifically not because they were great, or not because they were talented so they could become great. Jesus chose them to learn from Him and become like Him. He told them, “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*” (*Matthew 11:29*).

These were people like us who Jesus found lost, wandering around as spiritual beggars, continually falling into the pit of sin. When Jesus found us and chose us, His choice was not based on our greatness or potential greatness. We were spiritually ignorant, knowing nothing about God’s perfect and holy character. But God chose us to take on the very character of the Savior. Then why do we argue about unimportant, foolish things like which of us is the “Righter”? It seems obvious that our attention ought to always be focused on Christ who alone is perfectly righteous.

The issue was a matter of superiority. Ironically, none of the disciples were superior. They were all very needy, faltering humans. This was like trying to decide who is the world’s tallest pygmy. Imagine men arguing about who was superior when none of them could actually stay awake until the end of prayer meeting. The argument was actually like, “Which of the ‘little faith’ guys had the most little faith?” Or, “Which of them had the best educational background, or came from the most ‘blue-blooded’ line?” None of them came with such natural qualities.

Therefore, instead of this being a legitimate debate about what constitutes greatness, this was just a very childish, playground kind of argument. The followers of Christ were completely caught up in the weakness of the flesh which was foolish.

Jesus demonstrated the great truth about greatness. Jesus knew what His followers were thinking. *But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts (v.47a)*. Jesus always knows what His people are thinking. Perfect knowledge is very perceptive. Sometimes Jesus knew what people thought, or why they said what they said, because He understands humanity perfectly. As much as some people hate to admit it, we are very predictable. If you observe the same actions,

traits, or words over and over, you kind of know what road someone is on and where they are heading.

More than that, Jesus often practiced a certain amount of omniscience. This divine trait means that God knows every detail of our thoughts all the time. He knows when we are arguing, why we are arguing, and knows the motivation for our arguments better than we do. That is why it is good for husbands and wives to sit down together and talk to God when an argument arises about which of them is greatest . . . or as we would put it, whose needs are not being met, and should they be met, and why they are not being met.

Jesus knows what we think in our hearts. The reasoning of the heart is what causes life to happen. Solomon challenged us, *Guard your heart more than anything else, because the source of your life flows from it (Proverbs 4:23 GWV)*. The heart is the essential character of a person. It is the place within us where we think, make decisions, feel. It is very difficult to learn how to keep control (guard) this invisible part of us, because keeping control or not keeping control is determined in the same realm where the guarding is necessary. How do you teach yourself to filter your thinking? How do you teach yourself to make decisions according to God's will? How do you teach yourself to get control of your emotions?

The answer to all of those questions is well known. Paul wrote it in his letter to the Roman Christians. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1-2)*.

Jesus pictured greatness for the future leaders. Jesus *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" (vv.47b-48a)*. We need to consider the culture in which Jesus presented this illustration. In that culture, children were not important and certainly not doted on like they are in the American culture. When a young man reached adulthood, he was deemed important. When a young woman reached marriageable age, she was

important. But while they were children, they often were exploited, abused, and at best ignored.

For Jesus to reach out and pull a child to His side would have aroused much question. In fact, Mark tells us that Jesus took the child into His arms (Mark 9:36). The point was that Jesus set one of the most insignificant persons in the crowd in front of the disciples and taught us a very important lesson. How do we know if we have received Christ, and what difference does it make? Well, how do we treat the insignificant people? Are we so proud that we cannot be like Christ who embraced the unimportant person? Jesus simply demonstrated His own humility by embracing a lowly esteemed child.

The principle is this: *For he who is least among you all is the one who is great (v.48b)*. God's ways are not our ways. We think the important people, the achievers, the heros and stars are great. God knows that the humble are great. It is possible for someone to be unimportant, insignificant and still proud. But Jesus is our example. *Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8)*.

Intentionally lowering ourselves, seeing ourselves as only recipients of God's grace, keeps us from becoming "great," i.e. esteemed highly in our own eyes.

Everyone Should Follow Us, Right (vv.49-50)?

A perverted view of greatness tries to stop people who appear to serve Jesus errantly. As the apostles heard Jesus mention the character of true greatness, John thought of a situation recently in which he had stepped up to defend the greatness of Jesus. In that case from the past, the apostles tried to stop someone who was doing kingdom work. John answered, *"Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him" (v.49a)*.

Maybe this is John's response to realizing that the humble Jesus is the standard of greatness, and he was ready to defend Him and His ministry. Or maybe this was his confession of the sin Jesus just brought to the surface. Or maybe he just needs clarification. Whatever

the thinking, it does appear that John missed the whole point of greatness revealed in humility. Granted, John was not among the other nine disciples when they failed at exorcismbut they did fail. Regarding the recent incident of the demon-possessed boy, the nine apostles were humbled when they failed. They didn't look very great. But then "We" saw a guy trying to do the ministry of Jesus and "We" (the failures) tried to stop him. That is not humility!

The apostles tried to stop the minister because he did not follow them. He was casting out demons, but we tried to stop him "because he does not follow with us" (v.49b). In a way this seems like a logical or right argument. Did not Jesus choose these men? Was He not training them on purpose for a purpose? What would we conclude about someone who was doing Jesus kind of work outside the scope of Jesus's training?

But God does not bring all of His servants along the same path of training. Often our journey to heaven becomes like traveling along a road bordered on both sides by a hedgerow or fences. We develop those hedges through Bible study, prayer, teaching and applying Bible truth to our experiences in life. The danger is that we tend to believe that since we have come to certain positions of preference through our Bible study and experiences, that everyone who is on the journey to heaven should be on this same road with us. That is pride. Humility teaches us that there is someone else on the other side of the hedgerow who is just as sincere in his or her journey to heaven, just as trained in the Bible, but has come to different preferences than we hold.

Jesus taught the better principle. It was not the apostles' responsibility to stop the minister. Therefore, *Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him"* (v.50a). By this command Jesus removed any doubt that this exorcist was also a disciple of Christ doing the work of God. Sometimes we need to broaden our understanding of who is serving God and how.

The greater principle is that "the one who is not against you is for you" (v.50b). Sometimes we really don't know if someone else is doing the Lord's work in the wrong way. Sometimes we do know that a person's practice is patently forbidden in the Bible. But even then it is not always our responsibility to correct them.

Having said this, there is also a time to point out error and to correct others. The pastor teacher is responsible to correct those under his care. God requires him to, *Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (2 Timothy 4:2)*. Also, *He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it (Titus 1:9)*. And it is the duty of all believers to expose error, even if it is only by the way they live. *Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them (Ephesians 5:11)*. But none of us are in a position to confront and correct all the sin and error in the world.

Should We Call for God's Judgment on People Who Are Not Like Us (vv.51-56)?

On the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus sent messengers to prepare the way. He was leading on toward Jerusalem. *When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem (v.51)*. This is a transitional statement. From this point on in Luke's Gospel account, Jesus is completely focused on going to Jerusalem, being apprehended and paying the price for our sins on the cross—which is the work He came to do.

Jesus sent messengers ahead of Himself who were supposed to make preparations. *And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him (v.52)*. Primarily that means they were to get a place to stay or find lodging and food. Maybe Jesus could do some ministry among the Samaritans. But that wasn't likely.

In fact, the Samaritans rejected Jesus's messengers. *But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem (v.53)*. It was obvious that Jesus was not there to minister to the Samaritans but to complete His work in Jerusalem. Maybe the people misinterpreted Jesus' determination to complete the task as a shunning of them. Whatever the cause, we do see a reminder here that stubborn people make relationships difficult. But who determines what constitutes stubbornness and who determines who is guilty?

The text reveals a couple of contrasting responses to Samaritan stubbornness. On the one hand, a couple of disciples displayed a very human solution to stubbornness. *And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" (v.54).* Power to control God's fire would prove greatness, wouldn't it? Again, they forgot that greatness is revealed in longsuffering and humility not in controlling heavenly fire.

In contrast to the human response is the divine solution to stubbornness. Jesus rebuked the disciples for thinking according to sinful human nature. *But he turned and rebuked them (v.55).* One would expect Jesus to rebuke the Samaritans who rejected Him. But the lessons of humility are for us, the followers of Jesus. Because people rejected Him, they will reject us. When we bow our backs and try to express our supposed authority, Jesus needs to pass judgment on us and admonish us sharply.

It was time to move on. *And they went on to another village (v.56).* That Jesus and the disciples moved on from Samaria was bad news for the Samaritans. But history proved how God had suffered long with stubborn, rebellious Israel and then moved on. And modern history indicates that God moves on from cultures that reject Him.

When we think too highly of ourselves, we will respond in the weaknesses of human flesh. When we respond in a fleshly manner, it is a real good indication that we need to learn more from Jesus about controlling the heart.