

“THE GREAT GOD AND OUR QUEST FOR GREATNESS”
LUKE 9:46-50

It’s hard to be humble. Pride may show up at the most unexpected times and unexpected places.

Consider the story of William Masvinu and Mison Sere. For three years (2012-14) **William** won Zimbabwe’s annual “Mister Ugly” contest. But in 2015 he lost the title to **Mison**. And he protested, “claiming that Sere was ‘too handsome’ to win and his ugliness wasn’t natural since it was based on missing teeth....‘I am naturally ugly. He is not. He is ugly only when he opens his mouth,’” William said. And Mison proudly replied, “...[He] should just accept that I am uglier than [him]...I hope to get a TV contract. I already moved around schools performing and showcasing my ugliness so this is a chance to make it on TV.”

So a new claim to fame — “I’m uglier than you...” The quest for greatness is greater than I thought.

But maybe we shouldn’t be surprised by the pursuits of pride. After Jesus showed His inherent glory on the mount of Transfiguration to Peter, James, and John, and after He demonstrated His Messianic power by casting out the powerful demon from the possessed boy, and after He revealed His great humility to the disciples by reiterating His intention to go to the cross, the Twelve got into an argument about who was the greatest among them. Remarkable. (And I don’t mean that in a good way.) And so like us.

Even in the presence of true greatness, the temptation of the flesh is to be prideful. It was true in the Garden of Eden, it was true with the Twelve, and it is true of us. Said one writer, “The proud man is simply one who bends the knee and worships a more hateful idol than can ever be found in the whole catalogue of heathendom, and its name is ‘Self!’”

Jesus’ interaction with the Twelve and their battle with pride is instructive for us as well. It reminds us...

IF WE WANT TO BE GREAT, WE WILL BE GREAT IN KNOWING AND FOLLOWING CHRIST.

Greatness isn’t in accomplishments or position; greatness is a gift from God given to those who are humble and low. “Unlike the world, status is not a virtue.” [Bock] In these verses, Luke records the final episodes of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, which is a reminder to the Twelve (and us) to take up their crosses and follow Christ (v. 23). Believe in Him. Submit to Him. Love Him. Obey Him. Why? Because He is great and we are not. In these stories we see **two temptations of pride** and two pathways to humility and greatness...

1. To Cultivate Humility, Serve the LOWEST (vv. 46-48)

- ✓ The TEMPTATION: “I’m greater than you” (vv. 46-47a)
- ✓ The CORRECTION: “I will serve you” (vv. 47b-48)

2. To Cultivate Humility, Serve with the “OUTSIDER” (vv. 49-50)

- ✓ The TEMPTATION: “He’s not worthy of serving with us” (v. 49)
- ✓ The CORRECTION: “Welcome fellow servants of Christ” (v. 50)

1. To Cultivate Humility, Serve the **LOWEST** (vv. 46-48)

• The **TEMPTATION**: “I’m greater than you” (vv. 46-47a)

- ✓ Mark (9:33) tells us that Jesus and the twelve have moved from Mt. Hermon and Caesarea Philippi to **Capernaum** (HQ), so this could be a day or two after the healing of the demon-possessed boy.
- ✓ Likely somewhere along the journey, **an argument** among the Twelve happened.
- ✓ **The argument** is about **greatness** — specifically, “*who* is the greatest?”
 - We don’t know what was said, but it’s pretty easy to imagine — “I had more converts than all y’all when I went out preaching... (9:1)” Or, “We went with Jesus up the mountain, so we are greater than you [nine],” Peter, James, and John might have said. “Sure, you went up with Him because He wanted to keep you in His sight at all times...” And so on. You know what this is like.
 - What is most striking about the argument is the timing of the argument — *immediately* after Jesus tells them of His willingness to endure the greatest humiliation in the history of man.
 - Luke said they didn’t understand; this argument demonstrates just how undiscerning they were.
 - Their struggle is a reminder about the insidiousness of pride and all its manifestations.
 - ... The Twelve still thought that the Messiah Jesus was going to establish His Kingdom by overthrowing Rome. They wanted exalted positions in that Kingdom (**Mt. 20:20-24**).
 - ... Their desire for “greatness” was not just for recognition, but for a pre-eminent position/ authority. They wanted status. They wanted others to have to bow down to them (Gen. 37).
 - ... Pride can also manifest itself in defensive anger, conspicuous consumption, unwillingness to serve (laziness), sarcastically tearing down others, etc. All those say, “I am greater...” And, “Because I am great, I don’t need to...” Or, “Because I am great I have a right to...”
 - ... And notice that the pride of the Twelve was competitive — it wasn’t just that they wanted position and recognition; they wanted it at the expense of others. That leads to *divisiveness*:

“Pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others....Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.” [C. S. Lewis in Rick Reed, *The Heart of the Preacher*.]

- ✓ It seems the argument was in hushed tones so Jesus wouldn’t hear, or perhaps when they were separated from Jesus on the walk, because Luke says **Jesus knew** what was in their hearts (**v. 47**):
 - [ASIDE: The statement about what Jesus knew is a good reminder about His deity: even while He was fully man and He laid aside the privileges of Heaven (Phil. 2:6), He did not set aside His deity or His divine attributes.]

- Even when Christ voluntarily did not use those attributes, He still maintained them (which is what we see in all the miracles). He is ever the God-Man with all His attributes.
- His demonstration of omniscience is typical (5:22; 6:8; 7:39-40; 11:17). And often when he demonstrated His omniscience it was followed with correction; it is coming again here.
- Their argument was a sin, but the greater issue was that their **hearts** were compelling them to claim greatness. They sinned internally in their desires before they said a word.
- It's good to deal with sinful actions; it's essential to deal w/ the heart that compels our sin (6:45).
- ✓ Piper: "The essence of sin is minimizing God and making much of self." That was the sin of the disciples — and it is our sin as well: "I'm greater than you, I'm more important than you..."
- ✓ How is pride being demonstrated in your life? Is it competitive? Has it become divisive?

- The **CORRECTION**: "I will serve you" (vv. 47b-48)

- ✓ With His correction, Jesus is also giving the disciples a lesson in sanctification. He's not only teaching them, "that's not the way to honor the Father," but He is telling them, "This is the way to honor the Father" — it's basic "put off — put on" principles. What should they put on instead of self-exalting greatness? What righteous act should replace their sinful arguments?
- ✓ Jesus gave them an object lesson: Jesus **took a child** (Peter's child?) — the child was young, but old enough to **stand** (toddler?).
 - A child is in the lowest social status, "the bottom of the pecking order."
 - "In Judaism, children under twelve could not be taught the Torah, and so to spend time with them was considered a waste....[One Rabbi wrote]: 'Morning sleep, midday wine, chattering with children,...destroy a man.' Jesus' action reverses cultural expectations." [Bock, 894-5.]
- ✓ In that context, what Jesus said was shocking: **whoever receives...** To receive a child is to welcome, embrace, and recognize the value and importance of the child.
 - Jesus is asserting the inherent value of children (human dignity).
 - He is also asserting the inherent value of serving the lowest and weakest; there is greater value in serving those who cannot return the service and who may even be unaware than serving those who can reciprocate.
 - It's easy to make a meal for someone who will reciprocate. Can we make a meal (or serve in some other way) those who either can't or won't reciprocate? That's serving the lowest...
- ✓ When one welcomes and serves those who are weak and low (for the sake of Christ — because one loves and submits to Christ), it is to **receive Me...and...Him who sent Me**. To welcome, embrace, and serve the least is to welcome and love and serve Christ and the Father. *And* conversely, to reject and demean the lowest is to reject and demean Christ and the Father.
- ✓ To serve in this way is humbling; it will take you down and "diminish" you. But you will in turn be great in the eyes of God — **this is the one who is great** (cf. v. 44; Mk. 10:45).
- ✓ The way up is the way down — He must increase; I must decrease (Jn. 3:30; cf. Lk. 9:23-24).

- ✓ “All people count, while comparison counts for nothing.” [Bock]
- ✓ Jesus will make this same instruction again when He has dinner at a Pharisee’s home (14:7-14).
- ✓ The disciples may not have immediately understood and applied this principle (22:24ff). But they would eventually perceive and understand (1 Pt. 2:18; 4:10-11).
- ✓ Are you struggling with pride? (Yes) Do you want to be great? Then serve the lowly. Serve the needy. Serve those who can’t repay. Serve without them knowing...

There is a second prideful temptation that Jesus identifies...

2. To Cultivate Humility, Serve with the “OUTSIDER” (vv. 49-50)

• The TEMPTATION: “He’s not worthy of serving with us” (v. 49)

- ✓ There probably is a break in time between vv. 48 and 49. But the themes relate. The Twelve were told to receive all people in the name of Christ; now they say that they have refused to allow some others to serve with them.
- ✓ The speaker here is **John**. We think of John as “the apostle of love” (gentle and kind) but in his early years he was known as one of the “Sons of Thunder,” which probably was for his bold opinions. Like Peter, he was known to be expressive and strong. (And the change in later years was a manifestation of what the grace of God can do in a man.) He’s probably speaking for the Twelve.
- ✓ John begins by addressing Jesus as **Master**. It is not the typical word “Lord.” It has similar ideas, but the emphasis is on the Master’s ability to give orders because of his authority. The disciples are almost the only ones to use the word (affection?) and only Luke records its use (5:5; 8:24...).
- ✓ John then raises a complaint (warning?) — **We saw someone casting out demons**. The person and time of his action is unnamed, yet we know that he is acting faithfully because John notes that he was acting **in Your name**. (Notice the repetition of that phrase from v. 48 — Jesus said they were to receive all people **in My name**, but here they are rejecting people in His name. It’s ironic.)
- ✓ Their rejection of the man is strong and repeated: the sense is that as often as the man attempted to cast out a demon they attempted to **prevent** (stop) **him**.
- ✓ What’s the problem? “He’s not one of us.” “He’s an outsider.” They are protecting Jesus’ “brand.”
 - It is true that he was not one of the Twelve. He apparently wasn’t part of the broader followers.
 - But he *was* a follower. He was working for Christ (and Christ does not rebuke him or stop him, which he would have done if he was acting unrighteously).
 - And ironically, he was successful where the disciples were not as successful (v. 40). (Was jealousy part of their misplaced pride and self-righteousness?)
 - It is true that Jesus had (apparently) only empowered the Twelve to cast out demons to this point (v. 1), but shortly He would appoint the 70 to a similar task (10:1, 17-18).

- ✓ *How was pride working in them in this instance?* They were jealous for their own exalted position and they wanted to exclude and bring down those who were successful when they weren't: "If I can't do it then I will make sure you won't either (because I have exclusive rights to it)." They were failing to rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15a).
- ✓ In contrast, Paul exemplifies a righteous attitude towards the success of others (Phil. 1:12-18).
- ✓ There *are* times and places to separate from others for the sake of ministry; but when there is faithful preaching of the gospel and serving of Christ, we ought to rejoice — even if we aren't recognized.
- ✓ Does pride keep us from delighting in the ministry success of others? Of other disciplers? Home Group leaders? Preachers? Teachers? Churches? Do we give thanks for the ministry of others?

• The **CORRECTION**: "Welcome fellow servants of Christ" (v. 50)

- ✓ Jesus responds with great clarity: ***do not hinder him***. The emphasis is "*stop hindering him!*" "Don't continue to do this."
- ✓ That Jesus prevents the disciples from their "protective" ministry also indicates that what the man was doing was in accord with Christ's purposes. He is not "in" the group of Twelve, yet his actions indicate he may well be on the way and the actions of the disciples were a deterrent to him and dishonoring to the Christ and His purposes.
- ✓ Jesus also provides a reason — ***for he who is not against you is for you***.
 - It is a proverbial statement; Jesus is saying that even though the man is not part of the Twelve or the extended crowd that was following with Jesus, did not mean that he wasn't a follower of Christ. He could be a follower even though he was not immediately with Christ.
 - "The man was not undermining the ministry of Jesus. He was not against him; in fact, he was for him." [Sproul] So don't work against those who are working for Christ. No competitiveness.
 - More importantly: there are only two options — either against or for Christ. "There is no middle ground." [MacArthur] Everyone either loves Christ and His truth or hates Him. And if they don't hate Him, then they should be embraced and welcomed. There's no room for pride.
 - Jesus is not advocating ecumenism, but He is advocating working with believers w/out jealousy.
 - Simply, "The man who opposes demons in Jesus' name is to be welcomed, not opposed. He is on the right side." [Morris]
- ✓ You might be aware of a similar, but contrasting statement in 11:23. How do we resolve "difference?"
 - In 9:50 Jesus is talking about relationships among believers and exhorting not to be exclusive.
 - In 11:23 Jesus is talking about unbelievers who are neutral and uncommitted to Christ.
 - Both verses are emphasizing the importance of being decisive in a commitment to Christ. You are either for Christ or against Him. There is no neutrality in our relationship with Christ.
 - Jesus is again reinforcing the call to follow Him in 9:23-25.
- ✓ Do you want to be great? Then welcome and work with and support the godly efforts of others. Envy will keep you from greatness; even worse, it will destroy relationships and ministry.

- Here is a description of envy —

“Envy is the painful and oftentimes resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by someone else. Sometimes we want that same advantage, leading to the further sin of covetousness. And sometimes we just resent the other person having something that we don’t have. But we don’t just envy people in general. Usually, there are two conditions that tempt us to envy. First, we tend to envy those with whom we most closely identify. Second, we tend to envy in them the areas we value most.” [Bridges, *Respectable Sins*.]

- And this is what envy looks like:

Edmund Spenser, the 16th century poet, is most famous for composing *The Faerie Queene*, an allegorical poem about the Christian life. In the first book, Spenser’s hero, the Red Cross Knight, encounters the seven deadly sins in the House of Pride. Envy is depicted as a man with cankered teeth, chewing on a venomous toad, poison running down his jaws. He wears a many-colored robe, rides upon a ravenous wolf, and hides a deadly snake close to his chest. Inwardly, he devours himself, weeping over the wealth of others and rejoicing in their misfortune. Envy grieves at the happiness of others and spews spiteful poison and abuse on those who practice faithful Christian obedience. [Rigney, in *Killjoys*.]

- And the root of envy is a discontentment and anger at God who providentially has given something to a brother and not given it to me. And that will destroy relationships and ministry. (Think about Abraham and Lot, Jacob and Esau, and Jesus’ parable of the laborers in the vineyard who all received the same pay [Mt. 20:1ff].)
- ✓ The antidote to envy and jealousy and the pride that compel them is a spirit of welcoming and rejoicing when we observe others serve Christ well (and receive blessing for their labors).
- ✓ Do you want to be great (in God’s eyes)? Then celebrate the godly successes of other faithful servants. Competitiveness will destroy a ministry. And so will jealousy and envy.

CONCLUSION: Reflecting on his first years as a pastor, Spurgeon wrote:

When I first became a pastor in London, my success appalled me, and the thought of the career which it seemed to open up, so far from elating me, cast me into the lowest depths.

Who was I that I should continue to lead so great a multitude? I would betake myself to my village obscurity, or emigrate to America, and find a solitary nest in the backwoods where I might be sufficient for the things which would be demanded of me. It was just then that the curtain was rising upon my life-work, and I dreaded what it might reveal. [Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon*, 52.]

Do you want to be great? Then let our hearts echo with this thought, “Let my name be forgotten, let me be trodden under the feet of all men, if Jesus may thereby be glorified.” [Whitfield]

If you want to be great, take up your cross (be willing to suffer) and follow Christ by humbly serving the lowest and humbly embracing and welcoming those who may be getting more recognition than you.