

“True Greatness” — Luke 9:46-50

May 17, 2020 — Mercy Hill Church — Pastor John Ferguson

The comedian Brian Regan once spoke about a dinner party that he was a part of where “me monsters” emerged, meaning that people who obsesses with not only talking about themselves, but also topping one another trying to convince one another of their superiority.

In the middle of his comedy routine, he asks the question, “Why do we need to top other people...? Obviously people get something out of it?”

Question: How do we tame the “ME monster” within us? How do we escape the comparison trap?

We’re going to look at a text from the Gospel of Luke today in which we see the disciples of Jesus getting caught up in the comparison trap. We’re also going to see how Jesus uses a child to teach them about the necessity of humility.

Whether you are new to Christianity, or whether you have been in it for the long haul, we’re going to see what Jesus actually thinks makes one truly great and in doing so we’ll learn the secret to true greatness.

A note about the context: the disciples couldn’t do the ministry Jesus gave them to do b/c they had too much confidence in their own abilities. Jesus pointed out the reason they had failed is because they didn’t pray. This wasn’t a guilt-trip, but rather evidence that they lacked humility, because true humility expresses itself in complete dependence upon God.

And so in the context of this failure, the disciples begin to argue with one another....

46 An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. [“...he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest” - Mark 9:33-34]

1. The argument: which of them was the greatest.

- (1) Greek word is *mega* (IOW, they were arguing about which one of them was the mega-disciple, the best of the best, the bigliest of the biglies, the cream of the crop.
- (2) This wasn’t a bunch of guys just ribbing one another: this was a genuine, bona-fide argument a bout which of them was the greatest.
- (3) Pride had reared its ugly head: strife, jealousy, rivalry, envy were all oozing from them, and they couldn’t smell its stench.

2. The disciples had forgotten one of the basic lessons they should have already mastered

- (1) From their Scriptures
 - Is. 66:2, “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.”
 - Prov. 11:2, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.”
- (2) From Jesus, who was the living embodiment of humility

3. But like the disciples, we tend to be blind to the way humility rears its ugly head in our lives.

- (1) John Stott, “At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is our greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.”
- (2) The disciples need to be rescued from themselves, from the comparison trap, from their desperate attempts to convince others of their greatness.

47 But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side 48 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.” [“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” - Mark 9:35]

1. In that day, children—though loved & cherished by their families—were the most powerless people.

- (1) The Talmud spoke of the chattering with children as one of the things that could destroy a person; it was seen as a waste of time.
- (2) Luke 18, people were bringing kids to Jesus so that he might bless them, but the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

2. Jesus takes this child, picks him up in his arms (Mk. 9:36), and says, *You must humble yourself and be willing to associate with the lowliest of the low. This is what my followers do. They don’t let pride get in the way. They serve those who cannot pay them back.*

- (1) This is so important in a culture like ours. We are taught almost instinctively to walk in a room, size up the people in it, and based on appearance, body type, clothing, skin color, accent, etc., who we will and who we won’t talk to.
- (2) We’re taught in success seminars to surround ourselves with people who will advance our careers b/c we will become like those we are around (& there’s a certain amount of truth to that). But with it comes pride, and an unwillingness to associate with those who have nothing to offer us.
- (3) So Jesus picks up a kid, says receive him in my name, and in doing so you are receiving me and receiving my Heavenly Father.

3. Jesus is telling them to not put themselves first, but last; to intentionally humble themselves and become the servant of all.

- (1) Do you want to know how to define true greatness? Humble yourself. Seek the lowest place. Strive to become a servant not of the rich and famous and powerful but of all, that is, the outcasts, the misfits, the ones who cannot benefit you with their status.
- (2) Jesus is the example *par excellence*: Cf. John 13 & the washing of the disciples feet.

49 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.” 50 But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”

1. Spiritual pride is perhaps one of the most insidious types of pride that there is. It is especially noxious among the followers of the Lord Jesus.

2. Max Lucado, *A Gentle Thunder*

Some time ago I came upon a fellow on a trip who was carrying a Bible. "Are you a believer?" I asked him. "Yes," he said excitedly. I've learned you can't be too careful. "Virgin birth?" I asked. "I accept it." "Deity of Jesus?" "No doubt." "Death of Christ on the cross?" "He died for all people." Could it be that I was face to face with a Christian?

Perhaps. Nonetheless, I continued my checklist. "Status of man." "Sinner in need of grace." "Definition of grace." "God doing for man what man can't do." "Return of Christ?" "Imminent." "Bible?" "Inspired." "The Church?" "The Body of Christ." I started getting excited.

"Conservative or liberal?" He was getting interested too. "Conservative." My heart began to beat faster. "Heritage?" "Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensationalist Triune Convention."

That was mine! "Branch?"

"Pre-millennial, post-trib, non-charismatic, King James, one-cup communion." My eyes misted. I had only one other question. "Is your pulpit wooden or fiberglass?" "Fiberglass," he responded.

I withdrew my hand and stiffened my neck. "Heretic!" I said and walked away.

So, why did Luke record these stories in his historical biography of Jesus?

In introducing us to Jesus of Nazareth, Luke is showing us that Jesus not only reverses our notions of true greatness, but also embodies true greatness himself. His Kingdom is an upside down kingdom in which the first will be last and the last will be first.

Jesus prizes humility, and defines it as true greatness. Humility marks those who belong to his kingdom.

True greatness according to Jesus is a willingness to humble oneself by serving others.
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Application #1: Develop Cross-Centered Vision

1. Jesus not only defined true greatness, but he displayed true greatness at the Cross.

(1) Philippians 2:5-8, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 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."

- Before the Lord Jesus asks you to humble yourself and serve others, he asks you to humble yourself and to be served by Himself. Receive his gifts of the forgiveness of sins; reconciliation with the Father; eternal life, etc.
- Remember, the Christian life starts by taking the first step of humbling ourselves and confessing our sins

(2) To develop Cross-centered vision is to redefine greatness by the Cross of Jesus.

2. Conceive the Christian life as a journey towards humility, and the Cross is your beacon.

Application #2: Prioritize humility as essential to your spiritual life

1. God cannot make you more like Jesus without growing you in humility.

- If Jesus was the essence of humility, and if God's goal in your life is to make you more like Jesus, guess what that means? God prizes humility so much that he will stop at nothing to see it brought about in your life.

2. How do you know if your prize humility? You pray for it.

(1) When I bring this up with people, most say, "No way. I'm not gonna pray for that. I know what God would do if I prayed for that. I would be eating humble pie all the time."

- But you say that humility is what you love about Jesus, you would say that true humility is a good thing—a Christ-like thing—so why wouldn't you pray for it? Why wouldn't you pray for God to do whatever it takes to make you more like the Savior you claim to follow.

(2) It seems to me that we can either humble ourselves, or be humbled.

- James 4:6, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."
- 1 Peter 5:5-6, Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you...

Application #3: Hunt down pride in your heart.

1. CJ Mahaney, "The real issue here is not if pride exists in your heart, it's where pride exists and how pride is being expressed in your life."
 - You will need the help of others to see this in your own life. Invite feedback: "I want to get a more accurate picture of myself. Where do you see that I am blind to pride in my life? How do others view me? Where is arrogance hampering me?"
2. Did the disciples learn to do this? It seems like they didn't think that pride was really that big of an issue.
 - Luke 22:24ff at the Last Supper, "A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.
 - If the disciples could follow Jesus could get this so wrong, what about us?

What if...

- What if we took seriously the threat that pride poses in each of our lives, and we were willing to hunt it down in our lives?
- What if prize humility so much that we actually began to prioritize the pursuit of it in our prayers?
- What if we develop such a cross-centered vision that the depths to which Jesus was willing to go to serve us forever marked our lives so that we are not only willing, but eager to serve others, especially those who cannot pay us back?

**MHC, may the Lord work in your a desire for true greatness,
and may it be evident in your life as you pursue true humility.**