

Greatness Defined

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The more I study the Gospel of Luke and the words, teachings, and values of Jesus, the more I'm confronted with just how upside down, just how unconventional the Kingdom of God really is. When I say the Kingdom of God, I'm meaning the ways and rule of God - the way God operates; what God values; what God praises and esteems. There are two kingdoms. There is the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of God. We belong to one of them. Col. 1:13 says, "He has delivered us from the domain (or kingdom or jurisdiction) of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son." So, vs. 13 says even more than we belong to one of these two kingdoms; it implies we start in or originally belong to the domain of darkness unless and until God delivers us into his kingdom. And, as you can imagine, these two kingdoms are polar opposites to one another. And what's so interesting about how we fit into this reality is that we have a choice to make: it's a faith choice - since it's a faith choice it's based on what we believe. We can live believing God's kingdom is true and right or we can live believing the domain of darkness is right. And since we need to be delivered from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God, you should be able to guess that the domain of darkness will seem right to you (REPEAT). We have to experience a breakthrough, we have to defy conventional wisdom to live according to the ways of God; it's a breakthrough of grace. We can know and experience God's kingdom through faith in Jesus' name. Today's passage is another perfect example of this.

The primary concern of today's passage is about greatness. I hope you want to live a great life. I pray you want to do great things. To live a life of significance. Of course, a pretty big question that needs to be answered is: *What does that mean?* What does it mean to be great or to live a great life? Greatness is defined differently in the Kingdom of God in comparison to the Kingdom of darkness. The world's definition of greatness will sound pretty familiar to you. The reason being is that's where we all start and what seems right according to the world. But God breaks into and breaks apart this domain of darkness with his new kingdom. And he implements a new way of living; a new way of relating; and this new way is so radical, so new, that it actually seems wrong. My guess is that most of you want to live according to God's new way, according to the kingdom of God, but it's going to take faith. So, let's look at our passage to learn what that is (READ Luke 9:46-48).

The *them* in vs. 46 are the disciples; that's who Jesus is talking to in the previous passage. And notice what they are arguing about; who among us is the greatest? That word *argument* in vs. 46 is often used to describe the kind of interactions and arguments that the hypocritical pharisees would have with Jesus. With that word choice, Luke is showing us that the disciples are acting like or aligning with the thoughts and values of the religious leaders, the people who are opposed to Jesus' ministry and work. It's not a good look for the disciples. They ask a good question, but their motives were ugly.

Jesus is so... Jesus in this episode. So, get what Jesus does. Jesus doesn't just rebuke them or correct them. Do you know what I mean? He doesn't just say, "Guys, knock it off! How could you all be so proud?" He doesn't do that. Instead, he wants to change the way they think; he wants to give them new categories to work with so that they realize that the foundation of their thinking is wrong. Parents, let's try to do this. I know it's so easy and natural for us to think that our parenting ends by telling our kids what they are doing is wrong and scolding them for it. No, that's just where it begins. There's more important work to do; we have to explain to our children, teach our children, a new way of thinking. We need to be teaching them kingdom thoughts.

So, how does Jesus do this? He takes a child and uses this child as an object lesson. He wants to confront the pride of the disciples by contrasting what they are hoping to be labeled (as one who is *great*) with one that wouldn't be considered or classified as *great* according to the world. In 1st century Palestine, a child was not given high regard. They wouldn't be particularly favored or valued. There's nothing about a child's size or strength that's impressive. There's nothing about a child's wisdom or intellect that would be considered great, either. And for some of these same reasons, a child is a good example for us, too, in the 21st century. It's quite possible that we have a dismissive, or worse, despising notions of children ourselves. Most of us, I'm sure, have heard, or even said, the phrase "children should be seen and not heard;" that's usually said in a demeaning way of children. Or consider the phrase, "Kids these days!" That's usually not a flattering description; we say that usually when we are discouraged or angry of what we see from children. And on a more sinister scale, children are especially abused and victimized because they are so vulnerable; they are particularly singled out because of their weakness. I think it's fair to say that children in our culture aren't considered great anymore than they were 2000 years ago.

So, when Jesus says in vs. 48, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me," he's saying a pretty radical thing. To receive a child in the name of Jesus means to receive a child in the manner Jesus receives a child, with the same goal, with the same perspective of Jesus. Doing things *in the name of* Jesus isn't some chant or motto that we utter at the end of a prayer that magically makes it work. Doing something in the name of Jesus is a depiction of a lifestyle; a lifestyle that models itself, it's actions, it's words, it's motives after Jesus'. Whoever receives this child like I receive child; whoever loves, cares, works for a child like I do receives me. And if you receive me, you receive the Father who sent me. So, wow! Look what Jesus is saying! Having this kind of mindset, living this kind of life is how you get to the top; it's how you get received by God himself.

The money statement is the last sentence of vs. 48, "For he who is the least among you all is the one who is great." That is a remarkable statement; that's the statement that reveals to you and I that God's kingdom is totally and completely different than conventional wisdom. I want to draw your attention to three points of significance.

Here's the first one: Jesus turns greatness on it's head right here and you'll only understand and accept this with the eyes of faith. In our world, with conventional thinking, the least is never the greatest. The greatest wrestler or boxer is the strongest, not the weakest. The greatest school is the one with the largest endowments and the most prestigious faculty, not the smallest endowment and obscure faculty. Greatness in our world is measured by size, strength, and influence. But Jesus says the complete opposite. Look at the wording: *he who is the least among you all is the one who is great*. Well, who is that? That child! The child is the least among them. Jesus pulls a child by his side and says, "The least among you is the greatest among you." Who is that? It's the kid. The kid is the greatest.

In God's kingdom, greatnesses is not defined by size, power, or influence. It's defined oppositely. Now, why? Why is that the case? Why is the small, weak, and marginalized considered great? I'll tell you the answer; are you ready? Here it is: it's because God's glory, power, and grace shine the brightest through the small, weak, and marginalized. Let me show you this from the Bible; turn to 1 Cor. 1:26-31 (READ). The point of that entire passage is this: God's saving grace is especially given to the weak, the small, the marginalized of Corinth so that his power, wisdom, and grace might shine the brightest. It's not that God loves some people more than other people; that's not the point. The point is that God has special regard for the weak, the marginalized, and the struggling because it's where his grace is best seen, recognized, and celebrated.

If we believe this; if we align ourselves with God's way, God's rule and Kingdom it shifts how we live our lives. If we believe this our values change and when our values change our behaviors change.

Imagine you show up for church; you take your seat and you wait patiently for the service to begin. And while you're waiting two different families sit in front of you. The first family is your all-American family. They look friendly and clean. They're wearing expensive clothing and jewelry. Their children seem really polite. And it gets you thinking: *Boy, this would be a nice family to join FBC*. The second family is a little different. They look a little rough around the edges; the smell of dirty diapers from their crying baby dwarfs the perfume from the first family. Their oldest has cerebral palsy and makes unsuspecting noises. *Shabby* might be the adjective you use to describe their clothing. Quick: when Pastor George invites you to stand and greet your neighbor, who do you welcome first?

James addresses the sin of partiality (favoritism) in James 2 with this exact same scenario obviously condemning favoring the rich and pleasant over the poor and challenging. But he says the most interesting thing about the poor family in vs. 5, "Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" The poor, the least of the world are chosen to be heirs of the kingdom! Chosen by God because his greatness shines through the things the world despises. Embrace it, my good brothers and sisters.

Here's the second very important consideration for us: if we want to pursue greatness, we will pursue such a path ourselves. The least. I'm not looking to be made much of; I'm not looking for the approval and applause of man. That's going to drive you to a different kind of life. Jesus simply, but very bluntly, says this in Matthew 23:11, "The greatest among you shall be your servant." Here's what this means for us (this is really practical): You are great when you unglamorously change diapers in the nursery so that moms and dads can listen to the Word of God preached on a Sunday morning. You are great when you go visit our senior saints without the applause of others. You are great when you sit down with that new couple that nobody else is sitting by at the church potluck instead of sitting at the cool table. You are great when you invite the kid that is having a hard time making friends into the game you're playing with your pals. Greatness in the kingdom is doing the stuff others don't want to do; doing the stuff that doesn't get you a reward from others on this earth. Friends, I'm constantly telling myself when confronted with opportunities to serve, but with a flesh that doesn't want to, "This is greatness, Brian. Stoop down, Brian. Put away your pride, Brian. Don't seek earthly reward or applause. Doing the work nobody else wants to do is what it means to be great in the kingdom of God."

Finally, let's close talking about our view and regard of children. Jesus could have used a lot of different people as an object lesson. He could have used the town drunk and said, "Not many consider him great, but in the kingdom he is." Jesus could have pulled the refugee next to him; he could have found an old, poor man. He could have found a disabled woman. And the point would have been the same - the least is the greatest. But he took a child. Friends, if there is any community that should have special care and regard for children, it's the church of Jesus Christ. It's followers of the master who said of children, "To them belongs to the Kingdom of God." I love how this church invests so much in the well-being of children. I love how you give of yourself to boys and girls of all ages. We should; they are precious to our Lord. Think with me now of the ways that we can receive them. That's what Jesus said, right? Whoever *receives* this child in my name receives me. To receive a child in Jesus' name means to accept, to welcome, to value children the way Jesus accepts, welcome and values children. Instead of cursing teenagers and how they're not like this or not like that, Jesus would welcome teenagers. He would teach them. He would listen to them. Sure, Jr. high and Sr. high students need wisdom, but how would Jesus give wisdom? I like Prov. 16:23 a lot, "The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips." The right kind of corrective speech to our teenagers isn't a belittling, despising speech; it's a careful, persuasive, respectful speech. I'm thinking that will go a long way.

Or consider with me vulnerable children. How might adoption and foster care factor into our calling to receive a child in the name of Jesus? Would not our master say, "Well done, faithful servant!" when we'd be willing to unceremoniously receive children into our home and let them eat at our table?

The many ministries of FBC to our children require sacrifices, don't they? To receive children through teaching, through serving, through caring will cost you something. It will cost

you time. It will cost you effort. It will cost you energy and even prayers. But can you receive a child in the name of Jesus and not have it cost you?

Let me get a little personal this morning: are you receiving children in the name of Jesus? What needs to change in you where you receive children the way Jesus is calling you to? For some of you, I'm guessing you need to change the way you think. You do think children should be seen and not heard; you're more annoyed at the needs and immaturity of kids than broken and burdened to help them be wise. Friends, ask God to change you; those ungodly thoughts are not aligned with the Kingdom of God. Some of you are just checked out. You're indifferent. You say no to serving children through the ministries of FBC because you don't consider it *fulfilling*, as if that's what it's about - your fulfillment. Again, ask God to change your heart, your mind and your actions. And he will.

Let's pursue greatness together, my brothers and sisters, by turning conventional wisdom on it's head and embracing the weak, the simple, the despised, and the marginalized. When we do, Christ will be lifted high.

Key vs. Luke 9:48

Questions for the week

- Is it hard to believe/understand that we first belong to the domain of darkness and need to be delivered to the kingdom of God? What makes it hard to believe this?
- Has today's message changed your view of children at all and how you should relate to them? Why?
- What keeps you from being a servant to all? (i.e. selfishness? pride? poor thinking?)
Share this with another and ask for prayer to change.