

Becoming Great

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[0 : 00] As Stephen said, my name is Graham, and I'm very happy to add my welcome to his. And if you're looking for someone to chat to afterwards and you're new or revisiting, then I hope this face is friendly enough that you'll seek me out and we get to meet you.

Luke chapter 9 and verse 46. Hear the word of the Lord as recorded for us here.

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had the child stand beside him.

And then he said to the disciples, whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.

Master, said John, we saw someone driving out demons in your name. And we tried to stop him because he is not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said.

[1 : 09] For whoever is not against you is for you. As the time approached for Jesus to be taken up to heaven, he resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

And he sent messengers on ahead who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready. But the people there did not welcome Jesus because he was heading for Jerusalem.

When the disciples, James and John, saw this, they asked, Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven and destroy these Samaritans? But Jesus turned and rebuked them.

And then he and the disciples went to another village. This is the word of God. Let's pray. Lord, I pray now that you would bless the hearing of your word.

We ask that you would convict us where necessary, that you would comfort us by your gospel. And that you would conform us to Christ and his image.

[2 : 12] And we pray all these things in his name. Amen. Amen. Well, the imagined fictional story is told by a man, some of you would have heard of, called Fyodor Dostoevsky.

He writes about the Great Inquisition in Spain towards the end of the 15th century. During what he calls this, the most terrible time of the Inquisition, as it gets going and is perhaps at its fiercest and state-enforced heights.

Dostoevsky goes on to say, The fires were lit every day and in every corner of the city of Seville and burnt to the glory of God. The wicked heretics were burnt there.

And yet, all these years later, most historians reflect on the Inquisition and see it as nothing but a greedy power grab on behalf of those who led the country.

And the travesty of the Inquisition, and whatever you know about it, is not only that thousands, as many as 3,000 people in the city of Seville, were murdered, essentially murdered in cold blood.

[3 : 27] But the travesty is that this was carried out by the Church of Christ and in His name. In a short episode from one of his much larger books, Dostoevsky imagines that Jesus Christ finds himself in the city of Seville during the Grand or Great Inquisition.

And he's captured. He's snared by the powers. And he's brought before the Grand Inquisitor. He's brought before the Grand Inquisitor to give a defense for himself.

And the Grand Inquisitor brings him into this ornate and wonderful-looking room, you know, with all the trappings of power and gold and success. And the Grand Inquisitor says to Jesus, Just look out at the city and see how powerful the Church has become.

Look at its influence. Look at its authority. Look how it rains now on earth. And he goes on. He waxes lyrical for a good few pages, if you've ever read it.

And throughout this, his prisoner, Jesus, stands before him and listens in silence. Towards the end of the section in the book, Dostoevsky writes this.

[4 : 44] He says, The old man longed for him to say something.

However bitter, however terrible, but Jesus said nothing. And then suddenly approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless aged lips. And this was all the answer he gave. And the old man shuddered. It is just a few pages in a terrific book.

And yet, in them, Dostoevsky captures, I think, better than most, the contrast between the world and its view and vision for power and Christ.

Dostoevsky captures the contrast between Jesus' humble love that he extends to all people, even his enemies, and humanity's love for power.

[6 : 06] Because here we read about this successful and impressive leader, a giant of a man, a great one, by all accounts.

And he has contrasts with Christ, the true head of the church, the chief shepherd, whose leadership is seen in love and in humility.

And I think that same contrast is expressed in our passage today. If you were starting to wonder where that was going. Jesus' disciples are completely off the mark. They're unclear about who Jesus is.

And as a result of that, they're completely confused about what it is they ought to become as followers of Jesus. They forget who they are because they have a poor view of their Lord.

And then end up having these distorted ambitions and designs for greatness, which are pretty much defined in the exact same ways that we just read about in Dostoevsky.

[7 : 06] So let's have a look at this passage and see these contrasts as they play out in a few different ways. Luke chapter 9 is really the start of the central unit in Luke's gospel.

It's called the travel narrative. And as we read, Jesus is on the road throughout it. Just a few verses prior to our passage in verse 44.

However, Jesus gave what would be his second prediction about his own death. You can have a look. It's just above there in verse 44. He says, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.

Earlier in chapter 9 and verse 22, Jesus said something very similar. The Son of Man must suffer. The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected, killed, and resurrected on the third day. And so Luke 9, as I've said, is really this watershed moment in the gospel of Luke for two reasons. The first is that there is this increased insistence on Jesus' part that he must go and that he must die.

[8 : 17] And so the second part is that he sets his eyes on Jerusalem. And this is where a lot of the confusion comes in for the disciples. Have a look at verse 51 in our passage.

We read there that Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Literally, it kind of describes Jesus as fixing his face on going to Jerusalem.

A resoluteness. Perhaps harking back to the suffering servant in Isaiah who fixes his face like flint on some difficult task ahead of him.

See, Jesus' journey, his mission now has a clear end point. And he is starting to explain this to those who have followed him for all these years. And yet have very different expectations of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

You see, Jesus has fixed his face towards Jerusalem. And ultimately, as we saw in verse 44 and verse 22, and we'll see again at the end of chapter 18 and the end of the section, that he's going to Jerusalem and he's going to the cross.

[9 : 27] The disciples, as we'll see in our passage today, really struggle with this. And so right at the end of this travel narrative, in chapter 18, Jesus kind of brings it all together and he says, Look, let me make it clear for you.

Listen to what he says. We are going to Jerusalem. And everything that is written about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. What is that? Well, he will be killed and he will be resurrected on the third day. And the amazing thing is, after all, that the disciples still actually don't get it. Their wrong expectations about Jesus had given them a warped view of their own faith.

And, as we'll see in our passage in three ways, a warped view of what it means to be great in the kingdom of God. They didn't understand.

We read in verse 45 those exact words. They are unable to grasp how Jesus' work will include his suffering, his rejection, and his death, his shame, and what appears to be his defeat at the hands of the powers that they thought Jesus had come to overthrow for them.

[10:48] And so in our passage, we really get three questions that I think the disciples, and I hope ourselves also, are wondering as Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem.

Three questions about greatness, about might. And those are all answered in our passage. They'll be our three headings for this morning. The first question is, who will be the greatest?

The second is, who is with us and who is against us? And then in the third place, the last question, who will be judged? Who will be judged? And we're going to have a look at each in part.

The first one in verses 46 to 48 is the question, who will be great? The disciples, if you have a look at verse 46, are along the way with Jesus, having just heard for the second time that he's going to Jerusalem to die, and yet they're arguing about status.

See, they've set their sights on becoming great. They're jockeying for a position in Christ's cabinet. Jesus has just reiterated that central to his mission is suffering, death, lowliness, and self-giving, and yet the disciples see none of those things as being a part of what it means to follow after him.

[12:02] Instead, they want to know who will be great. Who will be the mightiest? Who will be the most impressive of the 12? I mean, they're all already pretty great in their eyes, and yet they want to know who's going to receive the highest recognition, the greatest plaudits.

Who will stand next to the victorious Messiah once he's recaptured Jerusalem, once he's conquered Rome? Who will be the greatest in the kingdom of God?

See, these expectations and these desires that they have for themselves, though perhaps peculiar to their own situation and setting, are also quite typically human.

All of us, in various ways, long to be recognized. We may not seek out power, perhaps, in its most explicit or raw and kind of naked expressions, but all of us want to be seen.

All of us want to be held up by others, to be esteemed. And we long for that, like the disciples, before we think, oh, silly, silly John and James.

[13:17] And this longing, on their part, reveals a failure to grasp Jesus' true purpose, and, as we'll see, a failure to grasp what true greatness really is.

See, the disciples desire recognition. And as they do that indirectly, it means that they ignore the thing that Jesus keeps insisting, that greatness is seen in humility and lowliness, in service, in selflessness, and ultimately in Jerusalem, in sacrificial love that Jesus shows for even his enemies. See, their fixation on themselves is so, so far apart from Jesus' concern on others. Their obsession with status in the kingdom of God is worlds apart from Jesus' willingness to give that up so that others can be raised up.

Look at verse 47. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and made the child stand beside him and said this in verse 48, whoever becomes, or rather, whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me.

And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For, and this is the bit you want to underline, for it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.

[14:50] There's that word, greatness. Who will become great? See, the disciples have mistakenly thought that greatness is achieved through recognition, through the status that they desire, through approval and influence, through ambition, and through power.

And so Jesus brings this child before them and points them to someone who had little to no status at that time in the world. In the first century, children were essentially invisible.

And Jesus says, Look, whoever is least among you is the greatest. See, they imagine that the greatest person would be the person sitting on the throne.

The person wielding the scepter and reigning over others. But Jesus has already told them in verse 23 of our chapter that the one who takes up their cross and follows after me is great in the kingdom of God.

Now the disciples' gross misunderstanding is almost comical until we draw the dots and connect it to ourselves.

[16:06] until we recognize how similar we are to them in our own ways. See, Jesus says on countless occasions about discipleship that those who profess faith, that those who follow after him, that their lives should be marked by service and selflessness, by humility and gentleness, by lowliness, by self-forgetfulness, as it's been put.

A willingness to be overlooked if it means that someone else can be uplifted. These are the marks of someone who is close to the Lord and has understood what true greatness is because they have seen that greatness in him.

See, this is where Jesus' teaching prop, if we could call the child that, comes in. He demonstrates that greatness is not a pursuit of the Christian life.

Recognition and plaudits should not be the disciples or our ambitions. See, the greatness that Christ embodies, the greatness that he calls us to emulate, is lowly service.

And if you're like me, when you hear that, it sounds really strange. It sounds really odd.

[17 : 32] And when it does, which it often does, if we're honest, it shows me that I think less like God and more like the world around greatness and power.

It shows that I am more captivated by the lure of human recognition than the gospel and God's great love.

It shows me that I'm willing to settle for something less than what Christ is going to go on to achieve and model and offer to all of us in his grace.

Influence, power, approval, recognition, status, these are the things that we associate with greatness. Success and being self-made, possessing an enviable lifestyle that all the other eyes are fixed on, being looked up to and esteemed.

These are our measures of greatness. And when we do that, there in some senses we can no longer call Christ great because his greatness is shown in selfless service, humility, and in dying.

[18 : 49] None of those things. And so, the question, who will be great, is really a question of how do we measure greatness? Do we see it in the ways that Christ both describes and goes on to demonstrate?

Or are we even deceived into settling for other forms of it? Greatness, according to the Apostle Paul in Philippians chapter 2, for example, he says, is seen in the willingness to be considered nothing, to become a servant.

And he's only just riffing on the work of Jesus here. He doesn't come up with this. But because we measure greatness by something other than Christ's, we start to view things like service and humility as incompatible with the greatness that we desire.

And we all long for that recognition and approval. Who doesn't long to be great? And yet, in this first point, I think Christ exhorts us to see that greatness is usually seen in the places where we least want to pursue it.

in the service of others and in the forgetting of ourselves. Indeed, this is what Christ does himself.

And so, if we're to truly pursue it or to have our definition of greatness refined and redefined, we must remember the cross.

[20 : 21] And we'll think about this later. Because at the cross, Christ is made low and yet, it is at the cross that we read again and again and again throughout the scriptures that his greatness is most clearly seen.

And let this drive us towards becoming truly great. That brings us to the second question in our passage. The question, well then, who is with us? I think the disciples ask in verses 49 to 50.

They tell Jesus, we're traveling along because remember, they're on the road, they're going to Jerusalem and they say, look, we saw someone, Jesus. He's casting out demons and we tried to stop him.

They think this is a good thing that they tried to stop him. And there's two very important details to notice in verse 49. Have a look at it. The first thing is that this is being done in Jesus' name.

And the second thing is that the disciples identify this unnamed miracle worker as not one of us. He's not one of us, he's not part of the inner circle.

[21 : 28] He's outside of the twelve and yet, in Jesus' name, he is clearly doing the work of God. There's a striking irony in the disciples reproaching this man and perhaps a little clue as to why they feel this way or why they act this way and it's that in verse 40, Jesus had just rebuked the disciples for their inability to cast out a demon.

And so they come across someone who's doing it and we see their insecurity playing out. Here's someone doing something impressive in the name of our Lord but he shouldn't be because he's not one of us.

They'd become exclusive and insular. we might say judgmental or to use a wonderful old English word they had become haughty. And the worst part about this is that in doing so they were unable to see and themselves had started to obstruct the work of God that was taking place around them.

See the disciples feared that they would lose control. my former principal used to say that they wanted to be Jesus' top men and that meant that other people were competition. We've seen that in

the first question and now we're seeing it playing out in the second as they look outside of them and see more competition to them being recognized.

as they climb the rungs on the ladder to greatness they wanted to stand apart. But look at verse 50 do not stop him Jesus said.

[23 : 14] Now this point is I think very similar as we think about how it applies to us to the first one. But I want to draw out some slightly different application along those lines. You see as the disciples jealously guard their own position with this over concern about being and having status in the kingdom this recognition that they thought they deserved for following Christ as is one of the twelve they had lost sight of the bigger picture.

See more than this and more than their insecurity they had forgot that their discipleship was actually ultimately about Christ and not them.

You see when they come across this man casting out demons they immediately see him as a threat to them. Instead of having this larger picture of the kingdom a kingdom that exists to serve its Lord. And so by trying to stop this man again we see that they're trying to preserve and protect what they want for themselves. I preached this passage years and years ago and at the time when I preached it it was fresh off the back of quite a humbling experience for me back in Durban in pastoral ministry I was called to one of the local hospitals to visit a man from our church his name was Richard I asked him if he didn't mind his name being mentioned and he belonged to one of the Bible studies and I got there to visit him and to pray with him to read with him and encourage him and I thought I was doing really well and he had only been in hospital about a day and I sat down in his room and he looked at me and he said I'm so glad you come Graham and he said but you know yesterday another man came here and he read the

Bible and he prayed with me and he prayed that I'd be healed and I'd have victory over my sickness and now my instinct at that moment instead of thinking wow that's terrific here's someone else our theology perhaps doesn't quite line up but here's someone else who's visiting the lowly the sick who's come to pray with the unwell and is doing it in the name of the Lord bearing witness to Christ in the places where people typically don't want to go now I'd like to say that's what I thought but what I really thought was Richard are you sure his theology was right should we really be praying for victory over sickness is that something Jesus has promised to us

[26 : 14] I don't think it is and really I should have rejoiced I should have been encouraged I should have celebrated with Richard that here was someone else doing the Lord's work in Jesus name see the questions I should have been asking myself were rather why don't I do more of that how am I serving in these invisible spaces and places how am I reaching out to the lowly and the needy how am I bearing witness to Christ in the ways that most people will never actually see am I content if all I got to do for the rest of my days would be to meet with these people and share a word and pray with them or do I aspire to do something greater in the kingdom do I aspire to be recognized with some status or position that people look up to me and do I gravitate as the disciples did towards that inner circle that one I imagine those who are really close to Jesus or am I content to take up my place in the kingdom that he's building and the place that he's given me in it to bear witness to him why am I so critical of others doing this work in Jesus name friends there is no them and us for those who are in Christ see to erect these boundary markers

I think rather just reveals like the disciples that our discipleship has become about me rather than about the Lord who we all are called to serve in the various ways that he's called us to and this brings us to our final question verses 51 to 56 the question is who will be judged look at verse 51 to 53 the time approached for Jesus to be taken up to heaven and he resolutely set out for Jerusalem we know why he's going there now he sent messages on ahead of him who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready but the people there in Samaria they did not welcome Jesus because he's heading to Jerusalem because he's a Jewish rabbi they refuse to offer him hospitality now the disciples misunderstanding is again brought into focus here look at verse 54 two of the disciples hear about the

Samaritans rejection of Jesus Lord they ask brimming with indignation Lord do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy these Samaritans now we can track their logic I think the brutal cold logic of their question see Jesus has just been speaking about who is for and who is against him and here very very explicitly they can see people who are against Jesus and so James and John want permission power from Jesus to destroy these naysayers they want judgment to come against those who have misunderstood who Jesus is those who do not worship the suffering

servant those who think much of themselves so much that they think little of Jesus this is who John and James think they have in their sights and yet in reality that's them that they've just described as we've seen in this passage Jesus rebukes them verse 55 and they head to another town and so we ask what is going on here I mean these Samaritans seem like a pretty bad lot should we not destroy them well continuing with the theme of this narrative section the disciples again reveal that they have not grasped two things firstly they haven't grasped what kind of Lord Jesus is and secondly because of that they have again misunderstood who they are and what they need from Jesus you see here they are thinking that they are his mighty generals striding towards Jerusalem alongside him to do something impressive and great and have forgotten that Jesus is on his way to

Jerusalem with this tag along bunch because they need him to go to Jerusalem as well see they are arguing about who is great about their own significance and status and worth in the kingdom about who will rank highest when they get there who is going to be in the inner circle who is going to be in the inner inner circle who is going to perform the mighty acts of judgment on behalf of God and his Messiah but Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem Jesus has set his face towards the city we know because he is on his way to the cross you see it's at the cross that the judgment of God will be meted out it's at the cross that the judgment of God that they are so desperate to get a hold on will be administered not in impetuous vengeance not because of some kind of ethnic animosity that they feel towards the

[32 : 16] Samaritans not a knee jerk reaction to insult and rejection and not out of spite this is not how the judgment of God will be issued Jesus face is fixed on the task see the disciples want justice and haven't realized yet that it's at the cross that they will see that justice the disciples want destruction and ruin to fall on their enemies now and here and yet Jesus denies them that so that he might die for his enemies there Jesus mission is for those who are against him for those who pursue greatness and recognition apart from him for people who long for status who long to stand out Jesus mission then is for the disciples

Jesus mission is for us Jesus mission is for people who refuse the pursuit of greatness in humility and lowliness and in selfless service that's who Jesus mission is for this is why Jesus has set his face on Jerusalem throughout this passage the disciples are drawing these lines contrasting repeatedly between them and us amongst us who will be at the top who will be at the bottom who will be lowly in the kingdom who will be great drawing lines making these distinctions again and again they're seeking to do this and yet Jesus and as we've seen in the passage repeatedly the contrast is drawn between them and him between us and the

Lord this is the distinction again and again there is no inner ring there is no greater person and no lower person there is no exclusive status and power that the disciples hunger after so much in this new people that Christ is building rather there are those who recognize their great need for Christ and there are those for whom their greatest need is the recognition of others in the kingdom there are those who recognize their great need for Christ and apart from it are those who desire still to be recognized by others later in their lives the disciples would celebrate and write reflecting on the fact that Jesus wasn't waylaid on his way to Jerusalem that he continued that instead of getting hung up in these spats about greatness about who's in or out or in spiteful judgment against those who reject him

Jesus had set his face resolutely like flint towards the cross and this morning like the disciples we can thank and praise God that Jesus fulfills what he comes to do because it is there that he works not only for the disciples amidst their confusion but also for us it's there that God's love is on display and his greatness too because it is there that he makes his enemies his friends it is there that he makes a way for those who have rebelled and rejected him as Lord it is there that they can be forgiven it is there that the judgment of God will fall and the wonder of it is that it falls not on the supposed enemies the Samaritans or these silly disciples but it's there that the judgment falls on the son of God himself this is why he is on his way to Jerusalem because there

God's judgment is seen and the wonder is as we finish up that it falls on the one who doesn't deserve it the one who had all the power the one who deserved all the recognition the one who had glory the one who should be worshipped that's the person who faces the judgment of God and when we understand that it completely starts to redefine well firstly how we see ourselves and our great need this is where the Lord goes for you as well that you may be spared that you may be forgiven that you may be brought near and that you can stop going on throughout your life

scratching and desperately chasing after the recognition of other people because at the cross [37 : 38] God says I've set my love on you and there's nothing greater that we can get than that love and recognition and once we understand that once we start to work that through our lives it will completely redefine how we live them you think back to the questions and flip them around we would happily pursue greatness in those same places that Jesus does in humility and service and selflessness we'll stop drawing silly lines and othering people them us we'll gladly gladly cease judgment of those who are different and leave it to the Lord see just like

Dostoevsky's Jesus where we started in Jerusalem Jesus met with powerful opposition and his answer to it was not might it is love and grace and those who know him and know this work are those who too will be mocked not by love of power but rather in the practice of love and humility not in condescension towards those who are different as we follow after the crucified Christ then let us make his greatness our ambition let's pray Lord we thank you this morning for the Lord Jesus Lord we thank you that that his life lived and his death that he died was this great display of your love for us that we who are so unlike you and him that we who are so caught up in our own lives and worlds in our silly pursuits ambitions fix our eyes on him we pray redefine for us what it means to be great in your kingdom help us to readily pursue the way that is set before us by Christ won't you conform us to him won't you comfort us by your gospel and grace and won't we delight in being counted servants for our

Lord too is a servant we pray all these things in Jesus name amen