

He Who Is Least Among You
Luke 9:37-48
July 4, 2021
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CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 9:37-48

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction:

Who is the GOAT? In sports, sometimes that phrase is used to mean, "Who is the one who messed up and lost the game for us?" In other words, the scapegoat. But GOAT is also an acronym that stands for Greatest Of All Time. In some sports, there is general agreement as to who the GOAT is: in boxing, it's Mohammed Ali; in men's swimming, it's Michael Phelps; in women's tennis, it's Serena Williams; in hockey, it's Wayne Gretzky; in football (as much as it kills me to admit it), it's Tom Brady. Other sports have the title very much up for grabs, as in men's tennis, where Federer, Nadal, and Djokovic all have roughly the same amount of Grand Slam wins and are all still playing. It won't be decided until they all retire. In men's basketball, you probably know that there is a huge debate about who the GOAT is. Ever since the early 2000s, Michael Jordan has been regarded as the GOAT, but now many people are making a case for LeBron James taking the title. They point to his having been to 10 NBA finals to Jordan's 6, though Jordan's team were a perfect 6-0 in those Finals, while LeBron's teams have only won 4 of those 10. It's an argument for sports talk radio and for fans to endlessly debate, and it all depends on whether you value longevity, all-around game, strength of teammates and opponents, all kinds of factors to who you think the GOAT is.

Our passage today sees a group of men arguing about which one of them was the GOAT, the greatest. They were the disciples of Jesus, and Luke doesn't tell us how the argument started or what the specifics were. Maybe some of them were jealous that Peter, James, and John got to go up on the mountain with Jesus; maybe they were comparing how many people they had healed and how many converts they had won on their recent mission trips. Ironically, they were standing next to the Man that all Bible-believing people worship as the Great and glorious King. It was really no contest when they were wondering who the greatest was. But that is just one of the things that the disciples got wrong in this passage. Our three points this morning all revolve around what the disciples lacked: faith, an understanding of the cross, and humility. As we look at their faults, let's be reminded how we, as modern disciples, fall short in those areas as well.

I. The Disciples Lacked Faith (vv. 37-42)

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. ⁴⁰ And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹ Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴² While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

We probably don't think much about the people we meet in the historical accounts of the Gospels other than what's recorded, when they met with Jesus. But imagine being the father of a child who was tormented by a demon that you could not do anything about. In addition to what Luke records

about the torture that this demon did to the boy, forcing him to cry out, foaming at the mouth, throwing him to the ground, Mark says that the boy became stiff as a board and ground his teeth (Mark 9:18) as well as making the boy deaf and dumb (Mark 9:25), and Matthew says that the spirit cast him into fire or water (Matthew 17:15). I can't fathom such evil that would torture a child or the hopelessness that his parents felt. The family had probably talked to all kinds of doctors and rabbis about how to make their son better, probably tried all kinds of cures, only to be disappointed the next time their son was attacked. At the risk of getting their hopes up one more time, this loving father had determined that they had to at least try to find this miracle-worker that they had heard was healing people and casting out demons all over the countryside.

So he took his son to where he heard Jesus might be, at the foot of a mountain. But Jesus wasn't there, only some of His disciples. So the father explained to maybe Andrew or Bartholomew that he had come to have Jesus cast the demon out of his son, but since Jesus wasn't around, would any of them have the power to do that? "Yes, we've learned how to cast out demons," they might have replied. But several attempts to rebuke the demon and send him out of the boy failed. Maybe the man thought about leaving and heading home, with one more disappointing attempt to cure his son behind him. But then he caught sight of Jesus with the huge crowd surrounding him and he fought his way to the front. Once more he would beg for his boy's life.¹

In verse 41, after the father explained his situation, Jesus lamented about the faithless and twisted generation – how long do I have to bear with you? Many readers assume that He was talking to the father, since it's followed by "*bring your son here.*" But I think that was directed to His disciples, pointing out their lack of faith; that's why they couldn't cast the demon out. Matthew's Gospel spells it out pretty clearly: "*Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.'*" (Matthew 17:19-20).

There are probably a lot of people who look at Christians and the Church today and think, "Man, they can't solve the world's problems, they don't seem to have much power. So Christianity must be powerless." That's perhaps what the crowd who watched the disciples fail in casting out the demon might have thought. But that's a leap in logic that you cannot take. Just because Jesus' followers don't do things right doesn't mean that Jesus Himself can't do it! The abilities and moral character of Christ-followers help to show the world the Gospel, but they don't prove or disprove what Jesus is capable of. The father learned where he was assured of getting help – he brought his problem straight to Jesus. Bring your children, bring your marriage, bring your addictions, bring everything wrong in your life to Jesus. Jesus' followers can help you, but ultimately, they should point you to the One who can do all things.

After Jesus directed the father to bring his son to Him, the demon attacked him one last time. But a sharp rebuke from Jesus healed the boy. We don't know where the demon went, as we did in the recent story where the demons went into the pigs. But it was gone, and the boy was restored. The next few verses show the amazement of the crowds but also the obliviousness of the disciples.

II. The Disciples Lacked an Understanding of the Cross (vv. 43-45)

⁴³ *And all were astonished at the majesty of God. But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, ⁴⁴ "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to*

¹ Adapted from Carolyn Arends, *Living The Questions: Making Sense of the Mess and Mystery of Life* (Nashville: CCM Books, 2000), pp. 198-204.

be delivered into the hands of men.”⁴⁵ But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

As we’ve heard time and again in Luke, the crowds marveled and were astonished and amazed. But we don’t see Jesus basking in their praise and hyping them up further; we see the opposite as He told the disciples: “I’m getting arrested soon.” What a buzzkill! It’s like He didn’t understand marketing and capitalizing on this great press: “If you think that was great, wait until you see what I’ll do next” and grow the crowds larger and larger. But I think that Jesus was trying to center the disciples’ attention on what would ultimately prove to be a greater spiritual accomplishment than casting out demons: His death on a cross. It was an attempt, perhaps, to get them to stop getting so caught up in the miracles that they missed the ultimate goal of His ministry: to die in the place of His people. The crowds may have been impressed and excited at the time, but they would soon desert Jesus when He would be arrested and brought to trial and sentenced to death.

Now, why were the disciples afraid to ask Him questions? Maybe because He had just said all that stuff about being faithless and twisted and they didn’t want to be called that again? Maybe they knew they should understand it because He had said things like it before, so they didn’t want to appear slow? Maybe they are just afraid to hear negative things. They didn’t totally understand what He was saying, but they knew it was bad for Him which meant it was bad for them. “We’ll take the glory of the Transfiguration and the victory over evil and disease, but suffering and death are not what we signed up for.” They didn’t understand the cross and they wouldn’t until after it happened.

The final three verses show us one more area where the Twelve fell short:

III. The Disciples Lacked Humility (vv. 46-48)

⁴⁶An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side ⁴⁸and 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.”

Arnold Palmer, for those of you who only know his name as a lemonade/iced tea concoction, was one of the greatest golfers to ever live. He was a small-town kid who grew up in Latrobe, Pennsylvania in the 1940s. His dad was a golf course superintendent. He tells the story in his autobiography, *A Life Well Played*, of winning his first major tournament over in Europe, the British Open, and dining with dukes and duchesses. He came back to the states thinking a whole lot about himself. Until he went home. And his dad got a little sick of his attitude and ordered him, “Put down that Claret Jug and help me mow the back nine.” So he did. And he reflected that it was exactly what he needed to keep him grounded and humble.²

Jesus did something similar: while the disciples argued among themselves who was the greatest, Jesus stood a child next to Him. Just that visual image at that time must have said: “Guys, you’re being childish arguing about who is greatest; you need to learn to be child-like, but not childish.” What’s the difference? Child-like is to be dependent and trusting of God and ready to believe things by faith; childish is to embrace selfishness and immaturity, refusing to grow up and learn new things. If you want to be great, stop arguing about whether you’re the best, strive to be the least. Embrace being small; in humility, consider others better than yourself. A child was one of the least significant people in the Greco-Roman world; it was generally assumed that you were wasting your

² Arnold Palmer, *A Life Well Played* (Manhattan: St. Martin’s, 2017)

time and that you could not learn anything when you spent time with a child. But Jesus says, receive the least of these. Pay attention to the lowly and make yourself lowly at the same time.

We are reminded of what true greatness looks like: becoming like the least and being willing to love those who have no power. I have been around a lot of Christians who like to subtly compare their churches or their way of living out their faiths. I remember one guy who told a group of men gathered for a breakfast that he got up really early and lived out his faith among a bunch of really rough guys on construction sites, so the rest of us could learn from him. I remember almost spitting out my coffee at what seemed like such an arrogant statement. But then I remembered my own heart and how I love to compare myself to other Christians. Even if it's in my own head and heart, I like to think how I've accomplished more and I'm more loving and make better choices. I'm more subtle than the disciples to be drawn into a verbal argument about it, but I know that I'm constantly comparing myself and trying to convince myself that I'm great. And I think Jesus whispers to me the same thing that He rebuked His disciples with: "*He who is least among you all is the one who is great.*" St. Augustine said this about followers of God: "For those who would learn God's ways, humility is the first thing, humility is the second, and humility is the third."³

Conclusion

I don't know about you, but knowing that the twelve Apostles, the men that Jesus chose to spend three years with and invest His life in, knowing that they got so many things wrong is a little encouraging to me. I'm sure you and I can look over our lives and the ways that we live and think, and it would not be hard to find a lot that we get wrong. Thankfully, Jesus doesn't demand perfection from His followers. Thankfully, He knows that we're a mess. Thankfully, He puts the Holy Spirit inside of us to teach us, grow us, and bring us to some level of maturity.

Mark 9:24 records the father from this story saying: "*I believe, help my unbelief.*" The first few times I read that, I thought, "that's an oxymoron: how can you believe but have unbelief?" But the longer I live, the more I see that belief and unbelief pull at my heart from different sides; that faith and doubt are both alive inside me. I know things intellectually, but often my actions betray my head knowledge, which means that when the rubber meets the road, maybe I don't completely believe as strongly as I think I do. For example, I believe that God will provide for my needs, but every time I worry or have a hard time giving to God's work through my tithes and offerings, I'm showing that there's still unbelief mixed in with belief. I identify with Paul's words in Romans 7:19 "*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*" Because unbelief is still there.

Carolyn Arends is a Christian singer who wrestled with this idea too. She wrote, "Why do faith and doubt sometimes collide so violently within me that... I am nearly torn in two? Why is it that the more my belief grows, the more I wrestle with unexpected spasms of intense unbelief?... I suspect that a great number of Christians discover as they journey with God that the more they believe – the more they perceive of God – the more doubt springs up as a natural response to the gap between what is and what is understood. To have real faith – faith that hopes for things that are not yet seen – we have to at least occasionally be confronted with a keen and painful awareness of just how unseen some of those things are. That awareness often manifests itself as doubt. The problem is, many of us are convinced that doubt is sin, a barrier to faith."⁴

³ Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 51.

⁴ Arends, pp. 205, 207.

There's a lot that we can talk about in terms of faith, how to have stronger faith that will move mountains, things like that. But what I want to zero in on today is that faith has to have an object to believe in. Many people will tell you that you just "gotta have faith that things will get better" or "faith is going to get you through this." But faith in some vague notions doesn't help anything! Faith has to have an object. I have faith that my car will get me home, I have faith that my bank will keep my money safe for me... we have faith in a lot of things. But nothing on this earth can absolutely guarantee our trust and tell us beyond a shadow of a doubt that our faith in it will be rewarded. My car can break down, the economy can collapse, all my friends and family could desert me. I could experience losing everything in this life like Job did. But after Job lost everything, he said, "*I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has thus been destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God*" (Job 19:25-26). He had an object of faith to hold onto when life fell apart: His Redeemer.

Martin Luther said that "a weak faith saves if it is faith in Jesus Christ."

→ Transition to Communion Table

Faith in Jesus Christ is the only faith that will not let you down. Faith that knows that Jesus can work any miracle. Faith that sees the reality of what Jesus accomplished on the cross – that He gave Himself up willingly for sinners like you and me who needed someone to pay the penalty for our sins or else we would be separated from God for eternity. Jesus' death on the cross accomplished that. "In addition to knowledge of the facts of the gospel and approval of those facts, in order to be saved, I must decide to depend on Jesus to save me... saving faith is not just a belief in facts but personal trust in Jesus to save me."⁵

This table is a table for all those who are following Jesus, who have bowed to His Lordship and embraced His sacrifice on the cross on their behalf. You don't have to be a perfect disciple, thank God! As we've seen, you will get a lot wrong and faith and doubt will continue to wage war inside you. But you've staked out where your hope for salvation and eternal life is found: in Christ alone.

Let's recite together a summary of the great truths of our faith in the Apostles Creed. Creedo is the Latin for "I believe."

Benediction - 1 Peter 5:10-11 – "*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*"

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings on the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), p. 308.