

This morning, we are in the 17th week of a sermon series that I have entitled “Meeting Jesus.” I have been making my way this year through Luke’s account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. This morning, we will be in Luke 9:43-56, looking at three brief interactions that have a lot to tell us about the place of pride, power, and exclusivity in the life of the follower of Jesus.

Luke 9:43–56 - While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, ⁴⁴“Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” ⁴⁵ But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it. ⁴⁶ An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. ⁴⁷ Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him **stand beside him**. ⁴⁸ Then he said to them, “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.” ⁴⁹ “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.” ⁵⁰ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said, “for whoever is not against you is for you.” ⁵¹ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely **set out for Jerusalem**. ⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then he and his disciples went to another village.

In these three short exchanges that Jesus has with his disciples, we see just how unnatural the way of Jesus is, just how countercultural the gospel is. Let’s look at the what, then the why, and finally the how.

1) Humility, inclusivity, and sacrificial love

Luke 9:43–56 - While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, ⁴⁴“Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” ⁴⁵ But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it. ⁴⁶ An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. ⁴⁷ Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him **stand beside him**. ⁴⁸ Then he said to them, “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.”

In the first exchange, we read that an argument has broken out among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. We aren't told why this discussion happened, although we know that in the previous verses, the disciples were sent out by Jesus to preach and minister, and they experienced the power of God working through them to heal. Soon after that, Peter, John and James are brought by Jesus up on a mountainside where they witness Jesus transfigured in his glory before them, speaking with Moses and Elijah. So although we aren't told why this debate started, we can understand why they would have started feeling a little proud about themselves.

And so, the disciples debating about which one of them is the most spiritual, or Jesus' favorite, or the one with the most talents or influence. And as Jesus catches wind of the conversation, he takes a little child, has him stand beside him, and tells them that the greatest one is not the person with the greatest prayer life or the most talents or the one who experiences more of Jesus, but the one who welcomes little children and the one who is least among them. Children in those days were of no real value, and so Jesus is telling them that if they want to be great, they should welcome and care for people like that.

Mark 9:35 - Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

Look at how unnatural, how countercultural this is. What makes someone great in the eyes of the world? Greatness in the eyes of the world is a factor of fame, fortune, and influence. And sometimes the church can get seduced into thinking the greatest Christians are those who write books, speak at conferences, pastor big churches, have many YouTube subscribers or Instagram followers. But Jesus says that this is not so. According to Jesus, the greatest in the eyes of God may be completely anonymous in the eyes of this world, completely irrelevant to the outside world. The greatest in the eyes of God are those who love and welcome people of little consequence, and who serve others.

Moving on to the second exchange:

Luke 9:49-50 - “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.”⁵⁰ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said, “for whoever is not against you is for you.”

In the second exchange, the disciples tell Jesus that they tried to stop someone who was driving out demons in Jesus' name because he was not part of their group. And in response, Jesus tells them to let the man do his thing, because if he is not against them, then he is for them. **In the first exchange, we saw a contrast between pride and humility. In this exchange, we see a contrast between exclusivity and inclusivity, between an unhealthy superiority and a healthy sharing of ministry.**

This is a dynamic worth meditating upon and taking to heart, because there is certainly a **continuum** in which we would be wise to avoid both extremes. On the one end is an uncritical inclusivity and tolerance that pronounces every belief and every approach good and God-honoring. But Jesus does not say that; he tells them not to stop this person because he is ministering in the name of Jesus. And on the other end of the continuum would be an overly critical and discerning approach that gets so specific and nuanced that it ends up excluding people and churches who, while not perfect, are genuinely ministering in the name of Jesus.

The sweet spot in the middle is a place of discernment coupled with humility, where we seek to know and live out the truth, and yet we are humble enough to recognize that we are not perfect in our theology and practice, so we do not have the right to stand on a platform and condemn and exclude everyone else.

Moving on to the third exchange:

Luke 9:51-56 - As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him;⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them.⁵⁶ Then he and his disciples went to another village.

So in the first exchange, we saw a contrast between pride and humility. In the second exchange, we saw a contrast between exclusivity and inclusivity, between an unhealthy superiority and a healthy sharing of ministry. And in the third exchange, we see a contrast between ungodly use of power and vengeance and sacrificial love.

I don't know why James and John thought that calling down fire from heaven would be something that Jesus would want to do to the Samaritan village that did

not welcome them. I'm not sure why they thought that it would be successful either. Maybe it was their recent exposure to Elijah, which called to mind the time that God sent down fire at Mt. Carmel in front of the prophets of Ba'al. But whatever their reasoning, they believe that Jesus would want to destroy these people who had rejected him. But they did not understand that Jesus had not come to destroy, but to save people, as he had just told them at the beginning of this passage:

Luke 9:43–45 - While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, ⁴⁴“Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” ⁴⁵ But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

And just as he had told them not too long ago:

Luke 9:22 - And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

And so, in these three exchanges with his disciples, we see how unnatural the way of Jesus is, how countercultural the gospel is. Instead of pride, there is humility. Instead of exclusivity and superiority, there is inclusivity and a sharing of ministry. And instead of power and vengeance, there is sacrificial love.

What a world we would live in if this were the case! Imagine a world where, instead of everyone striving for fame and fortune, strove to take the lowest place, to elevate and serve others? Imagine a world where people laid down superiority in order to love and include others? Imagine a world where countries did not resort to power and vengeance to advance their causes but to sacrificial love? Imagine a world where the Russians looked out for the interests of the Ukrainians, where those born with resources and means were more concerned about the needs of others than they were about their own, where husbands and wives considered each other better than themselves and looked out for each other's interests. You would have an orchestra where everyone plays in harmony, a world where every person was looked out for by everyone else. What a heaven on earth that would be.

So why don't we live like this?

2) The problem of our nature

The problem, of course, is that these ways of living do not come naturally to us. Pride, superiority and exclusivity, and displays of power and vengeance are much more natural than humility, inclusivity, and sacrificial love. While we may not find ourselves in arguments with other people about who is the greatest, you only need to look at social media to see how subtle yet pervasive our attempts to convince others that we are the greatest really are. All over, we see people trying to convince others that they are good looking, or smart, or witty, or a great parent, or generous, and so on. We are often arguing, often without knowing it, trying to convince others of our greatness, of our worth.

In a sermon by Tim Keller, he references an Arthur Miller play called *After the Fall*, where one of the characters says this:

“You know, more and more I think that for many years I looked at life like a case at law, a series of proofs... When you’re young you prove how brave you, or how smart you are, then what a good lover you are, later what a good husband or father how you are; later how wise, how powerful or whatever... but underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That I was moving on an upward path toward some elevation, where – God knows what – I would be justified, or even condemned – a verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day – and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself – this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench. Which, of course, is another way of saying – despair.”

And so we have people, churches, politicians, countries trying to prove themselves, driven by pride to be something, leading to division and war and brokenness and chaos.

And even those of us who may consider ourselves inclusive and not exclusive, look down on those who are not as inclusive or tolerant as they are. We aren’t just content believing what we believe or possessing what we possess. We naturally compare ourselves to others, putting them down in order to elevate ourselves. As C.S. Lewis’ wrote in *Mere Christianity*: *“Pride gets no pleasure out of having something; pride only gets pleasure in having more of it than the next person. 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. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about.”*

If others don't do it the way we do, we can exclude them, look down on them, and consider ourselves better.

And then there is the desire to use our power for vengeance, to condemn or ridicule those who are different, who aren't as spiritual or cool or sophisticated or smart or witty or whatever it may be. **We may not call down fire from heaven, but we are quick to slander, gossip, ridicule, and dismiss others, all out of the pride we feel for feeling superior to others.** Who will rescue us from this hell we have created? Who will set us free from our pride?

But there is a better way.

3) The power of the gospel

Luke 9:43–45 - While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, ⁴⁴“Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” ⁴⁵ But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

Jesus was going to go to the cross and die for their sins, for our pride, our arrogant exclusivity, for our vengeance, to show us a better way and to give us spiritual power to live it out. Paul puts it this way:

Philippians 2:1–11 - Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the **interests of the others.** ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— **even death on a cross!** ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

How do we become people of humility, inclusivity, and sacrificial love? We see Jesus, who had every right to pride, exclusivity, and power, laying it all down in order to serve and give his life on the cross in order to save us.

Matthew 20:25–28 - Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

John 3:16–17 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

When you see Jesus, the eternal Son of God, dying for your sins, what does this do to your identity? On the one hand, it humbles you, as you realize that you could not save yourself, that nothing you could ever do could make you right with a holy God. But on the other hand, it lifts you up, as you realize that you are so loved that Jesus gave His life for you when you did not deserve it, rescuing you when you were lost and headed for eternal separation from God. So how can you look down on anyone else? Where is the place of pride, of superiority? What gives you the right to use power for vengeance?

This was Paul’s story, and most of us know it is ours as well:

1 Timothy 1:12–17 - I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. ¹³Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—**of whom I am the worst.** ¹⁶But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. ¹⁷Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

What does that kind of identity to you? It humbles you so that you can not look down on anyone else. But it gives you a confidence, knowing that you are loved beyond anything you could ever know. This is not high or low self-esteem; this is God-esteem. I am a sinner deserving of death, but despite that, I have been loved.

1 Corinthians 4:7 - For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

Ephesians 2:8–9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

The gospel declares that there is a better way. **In Jesus, we are sinful yet loved. We gain an identity of one who is beloved, but not in a way that causes us to take pride in ourselves and look down on others.** We are able to admit the worst about ourselves, knowing that God has seen it all and completely forgiven it and loved us anyways. **And then we go out to love and serve God and others,** not from a place of self-interest or trying to earn our self-worth, but from a heart that wants to love others as God in Christ has loved us.

Go back to the first interaction in this passage:

Luke 9:47–48 - Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him **stand beside him**.⁴⁸ Then he said to them, “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.”

Now that you have seen Jesus’ sacrificial love as displayed in the gospel, and now that you have the power of God in you by His Holy Spirit, what does it look like for you to go and live a life of humility, inclusivity, and sacrificial love, not pride, exclusivity and superiority, and power and vengeance?

Serve in the children’s church. Get here early and welcome people. Give time to prayer. Serve one Sunday out of four. Help someone in need with a meal or financial help or prayer. Visit the sick, the elderly. Have compassion on the mentally ill. You want to be great? Go serve in the name of Jesus.