



The Inner Ring

Luke 9:37-50

Grace Waco | 5.5.24

This week I read an article by an online writer who was documenting a strange phenomena—he tried five different AI image generators, none of them linked to one another, and not a single one of them could produce for him what he asked: a picture of Jesus washing his disciples feet.¹

This is of course a well known story and image from the Gospel of John. If you simply search “Jesus washes disciples feet”, you will get plenty of artistic depictions of the scene. But if you ask AI to generate one, it seems to only come up with two kinds of images. In one, Jesus’ feet are being washed, like this:



And in the other, Jesus is washing his feet alongside his disciples, something like this.

¹https://freddiedeboer.substack.com/p/why-doesnt-ai-want-to-show-me-jesus?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2



Clearly, the input from these AI generators can depict Jesus and his disciples just fine, but something about Jesus being in a position of *servitude* doesn't compute. Perhaps it may be seen as offensive?

I wouldn't read much into this, as generative AI isn't known yet for its nuance. However, I would say that it touches on the main idea of this text today. Here we have several different pictures of Christ: healing the demon possessed boy, predicting his death again, breaking up an argument between the disciples, and rebuking the disciples—and what links them is that Jesus is confronting and overturning the underlying assumptions of his disciples. Jesus isn't who they think he is. They've seen him on the mountainside in all his glory, but they are still getting it wrong. They can't draw the picture of Jesus the servant in their mind—it's not in their programming.

And before we dismiss his disciples as hard-headed or hard-hearted, I think it best to put ourselves in the story. Their saying "yes" to follow Jesus wasn't easy, but it's not like they expected Jesus to act like he has. Remember, he has just given them authority to cast out demons, he has just shown his glory to Peter, James, and John, his identity in their minds is confirmed—he is Messiah!—and so their position is not one just of ignorance but of excitement. They feel as if they have arrived: they are "the 12" who know the secret of Jesus' Messiahship. And with it comes something more sinister: pride.

The easiest way to puff someone up with pride is to tell them that they have what it takes to enter a secret, powerful society. Tell them they have been invited into an elite club, the best of the best, previously unknown to them. C.S. Lewis calls it the desire for the "Inner Ring".

What Lewis says is that the temptation of the Inner Ring often has nothing to do with the content of the ring itself. It's less about the desire for what is available on the inside that draws us into prideful circles, but more the fear of being left out!²

No one wants to be the odd man out, the last one picked, the lone wolf. We drive by the Masonic Lodge on Washington Avenue and we can't help but think... What goes on there? We don't know. But just the fact that it is *excluded* us is enough for us to feel at least a smidge of curiosity, even temptation, which may just be too difficult to resist if we were offered it.

This is of course what the Serpent offered our first parents in the garden, the chance to be "like God", or more accurately, "in God's inner ring". The idea was that there was some information God was withholding, and the most terrible thing possible would be to be left out from it. So pride attached itself to the desire to belong, an innate human desire, and plunged the world into sin.

I think this temptation towards the inner ring is exactly what Jesus is trying to disciple out of his disciples, and out of us, through these stories this morning. And it starts with the reworking of our assumptions. The disciples have fallen into pride because they assumed that their position in the "12" grants them certain privileges.

It is an incredible thing to be called to follow Jesus. But we must be careful not to equate the kingdom of God with an earthly Inner Ring. Let's examine three ways we are tempted to do so.

The Inner Ring Tempts us to pursue Power over Faithfulness (37-45)

The story starting in **verse 37** has some similarities to other healings and exorcisms in Luke. The child is called the "only child" in **verse 38**, similar to Jairus' "only daughter" and the widow of Nain's "only son". The man's desperation is also similar to what we have seen. He clearly has a need for Christ that humbles himself before Jesus, so much so that he "begs" him in **verse 38**. Jesus dispenses of the demon with a "rebuke" which is what he has done to every other demon in Luke, and also the wind and the waves. Then, like the widow at Nain, in **verse 43** he "gives him back to his father".

The difference between this miracle and the others, and why Luke includes it here, is not the boy or the man, although in Mark's gospel we get more detail about the father's faith. Luke includes it here because it is "on the next day" (**verse 37**) after the Transfiguration, and already Jesus calls his disciples a "faithless and crooked generation". They cannot cast out the demon, even though Jesus has already given them that authority when he sent them out to the region earlier in Luke 9 to proclaim the kingdom. Clearly, something has happened in just 24 hours from the return from the mountain.

² <https://www.lewissociety.org/innerring/>

Peter, James, and John saw Jesus, in all his divine glory, glowing and talking to Moses and Elijah, and the voice from Heaven saying; “listen to him!”, and they conveyed that information to the other disciples (although not to the crowds, see **verse 36**) in some way. And that event changed them. Their confidence soared—but not in the right place. In Matthew Jesus says that this demon would have only come out with “prayer and fasting”.

The disciples assumed that power comes from the mountaintop, not from the prayer closet. They assumed that their authority in the kingdom of God, their status as bringers of Christ’s message and Christ’s power, came from their experience of being “in” with Jesus, not their dependence on Jesus.

The power you desire, to live up to your call as a follower of Jesus, to kill sin and proclaim the gospel boldly, to move into greater freedom and confidence and holiness—it doesn’t come from the mountaintop. The point of the mountaintops—and by that I mean those experiences with God when you feel close and “in” with Jesus, perhaps your baptism or your church membership, or your growing theological knowledge, or that breakthrough moment recently—are meant to draw you not to self-sustaining ministry, but to greater dependence. Peter, James, and John should have left the mountainside with Jesus not feeling ready to call out demons, but ready to listen to Jesus and call on him for help.

Jesus himself is the great example of this. Although he commands all power, he draws his strength not from his self-sufficiency but from his dependence on the Father. This is his point in **43-45**. The Son of Man (the greatest of men) is about to be delivered into the hands of men. What a paradox! Jesus’ greatest act will not be to exert his authority but to rely on God to vindicate him. The disciples are “afraid” to ask him about this in **verse 45**, because it is hidden from them. But also because they are afraid to admit their confusion—doing so would place them out of the inner ring!

They can’t handle the truth, and the truth is simple: true power in God’s kingdom doesn’t come from association with Jesus but through suffering with Jesus. The disciples are “the 12”, but they will only enter into the kingdom of Jesus when they are ready to accept both his and their suffering, to see their authority as the authority of dependence, of prayer and fasting. And this is how Jesus invites us into his inner circle, which is his kingdom. Not by appealing to our pride, but by inviting us to destroy our pride and cling to him.

The Inner Ring Tempts us to pursue Position over Humility (46-48)

This obviously leads us to the second assumption that disciples of Jesus make, which is similar: assuming position without humility.

Why are the disciples which one is the greatest? Because not only do they see themselves as expert demon-casters, they also are noticing some special treatment among the 12. They are likely discussing this because Peter, James, and John got to go up to the mountain and the other nine

didn't. Jesus is going to establish his kingdom, so what kind of positions will we have? If Peter is first, who is second?

Before you dismiss their talk as foolishness, I also want you to consider their cultural context. For quite a while now in the West we have lived in a guilt society, with clear moral standards handed down from Christian roots. We all know that boasting is morally wrong. We don't want to be guilty of being a proud snob. But Jesus lived in a classic Eastern honor/shame culture. The standards have less to do with what is *morally wrong* and more to do with what is *acceptable*. In other words, in a guilt culture, we want to be vindicated—but in a shame culture, we want to be accepted.

The Roman world at the time had a wide variety of moral standards, and so therefore did the Jewish world mixed up in it. So it was more important to be accepted than to be right. And a good way to be accepted is to boast about your credentials. To find your rank. It was common for all sorts of folks to boast of their family name, their religious rank or learning, or their citizenship of a certain empire or kingdom, as a kind of resume builder that would preserve their acceptance in society. It wasn't seen as off putting.

Naturally in this society, children were of little value. Before Christianity, no society valued children. Abortion was normal, abandonment encouraged. Children were afforded very little protection or place in society, unless they were heirs to some title or position. To "receive a child" is Jesus' way of saying: "honor a child. Give them status and acceptance". This was entirely counter-cultural then, a shock to the system. To receive a child was to put yourself on their level, to risk ostracization. This is one of the reasons that women in that society were likewise undervalued—because of their natural association with children! Anyone who could afford to have someone else take care of their children did.

I said this the other week, and I believe it: the more our culture jettisons our Christian heritage and becomes post-Christian, the more of an honor/shame culture we become. When moral standards are personal and flexible, the only standards we have left are standards of acceptance. We care less about being right and more about being accepted. If we find ourselves on the outer ring, canceled, then the shame we feel can be unbearable.

And when this happens, it is not good for the vulnerable. This week I read that 30% of Children Ages 5-7 Are on TikTok.³ The education of our children by social media is not forming them in virtue, teaching what is right and wrong before God, but in virtue-signaling, teaching them what will get them accepted and what will get them rejected. Why do kids at younger ages want phones? Because their friends have them! And many parents are willing to do anything—even using puberty blockers to destroy their children's bodies or surgeries to mutilate them—to make sure they are accepted in a society that values "self acceptance" above all else.

³ <https://www.honest-broker.com/p/30-of-children-ages-5-7-are-on-tiktok>

Many children are suffering and hurting, and instead of being taught the right ordering of the universe by a loving God, instead of learning to fear God and stay humble before him, they are being taught to fear being cast off from society and do anything to please man.

But Jesus values children. He teaches them, feeds them, notices them. He risks association with the lowly, because in his kingdom, position is not gained by breaking into the inner circle—it is by becoming “least”. His trajectory is not upward, but downward, not ladder climbing but kneeling and serving.

To “receive” the child is to receive and honor childlike faith. Again, it’s dependence. It’s valuing prayer and fasting over demon-exercising power. It’s knowing that in Jesus’ kingdom, we don’t have to fear being cast out of society for being too needy, too child-like, or too humble.

The Inner Ring Tempts us to pursue Acceptance over Charity (49-50)

In **verse 49** we move right to this story about John, who was on the mountainside with Jesus, rebuking someone who is casting out demons in Jesus’ name. With the context we have now, it does seem rather silly—I mean if the disciples failed, why not have someone else have a crack at it? But again, put yourself in their shoes. They have seen a lot, they are growing in confidence, but also pride. Notice they do not say that this man “does not follow *you*” in **verse 29**, but that he “does not follow with us”. And Jesus’ rebuke is not to stop him—because although he is not doing it in the style of the apostles, he is doing it in Jesus’ name. Clearly he is no enemy!

What John and the disciples are facing here is the sin of tribalism. They believe that because they are the “12” that their method is exclusive. They have no room in their imagination that their way might not be the only way.

There are many Christians who aren’t like us. Who worship differently, prioritize differently, even believe differently. But everyone who truly follows Jesus, who works in his name and who follows *his* way, should never be our enemy, even if they do not follow our way.

Our Church has several distinctives that we believe to be God’s unique calling, which are convictions that we carry. We have outlined them in our values—we want to be historically rooted, particularly in the doctrine and church practice of the reformation and also in the baptist tradition. This puts us in a certain “tribe”. We also have unique convictions that we believe are faithful to Scripture, outlined in our teaching statements. For instance, we reserve the office of pastor/elder to qualified men. This is not arbitrary—we’ve done careful thought on this—but it is different from many other churches. The office of deacon is not reserved to men—again not arbitrary—but again different than some churches in our tribe.

I was brought to faith in a large, contemporary baptist church. We sang lyrics from screens when a lot of churches still used hymnals. After high school I spent several years in a more charismatic

church and ministry. It was there I learned to love to see and treasure the beauty of God, the creativity of God's call. And then I attended a church similar to ours, where I had a gospel awakening, to really understand the magnitude of the love of God. I would be an absolute fool to assume that I have arrived, that all of those experiences have not shaped me through their faithfulness in the name of Jesus. But I would be normal. Tribalization is second nature.

I asked Rich Eva to give me some data points on his study of politicization, which is part of his doctoral thesis.

Here are a few points:

- 1) When a group of likeminded people come together, they typically grow more extreme in their like-mindedness, regardless of evidence.
- 2) More socially and politically homogeneous groups tend to be more emotional reactive (regardless of evidence) towards outsiders.
- 3) Political partisans on both sides will routinely defend the views of their political opponents if the views are attributed to their party leaders. (e.g. give a Democrats a quote from Trump but tell them Biden said it and ask them what they think—typically they will defend it, but obviously it is just because it is alleged to be their tribe's view) This displays a commitment to tribe rather than truth and reasoning.

We are tribal creatures. We want to be in the “inner ring”. And when we feel like we are in, we will do whatever we can not to get outside again, even if that means demonizing others.

The Kingdom vs. The “Inner Ring”.

But Jesus' kingdom is not like the “Inner Ring”.

To be Jesus' disciple is to throw aside your desire for the inner ring of man, and embrace your desire for the kingdom of God. Remember the temptations of the Inner Ring were to Power, Position, and Acceptance.

First, it's bigger and greater. There is more room than you can imagine. There is so much room for charity. And it's not dependent on you, it's about him. But in this kingdom, you do receive great power—the power of the very Spirit of God! That is a better promise than any other inner circle.

Second, it's even ground. There is not a single one of us who entered Jesus' kingdom by earning it. Who is the greatest in this kingdom? The least! This also means that we don't have to be surprised or emotionally reactive when non-christians are sinful. So are we! We can invite them in to greatness instead of judging them as less than. And when we do recognize the even ground of the cross, we are exalted to a position—that of *in Jesus*.

Third, it is full of acceptance. Earlier I decried that our culture is moving towards an obsession with image and acceptance by the crowd. This is lamentable—but there is a better way. An honor/shame culture tries to cover up shame by personal achievements and accomplishments. But our true shame doesn't come from being exposed as frauds before man—it comes as being exposed as frauds before God.

Jesus' kingdom is not an "exclusive" inner ring of "the best of the best", but it does invite us into something exclusive. It invites everyone, regardless of age, class, race, status, accomplishment, sin, failure, sickness—into an exclusive kingdom, and a real covering up of shame, a real acceptance. A kingdom of those who are willing to be made low, to suffer with Jesus, to expose their own need and "fraud status" before God—so that they can enter into that exclusive, inclusive, kingdom of those who are honored and accepted by God.

There is nothing wrong with those desires—but to truly receive them we must go Jesus' way, into his kingdom. We must throw off our programmed assumptions of Jesus and come, needy, to him, like a child.

The gospel is that Jesus died and rose so that he could bring us into his kingdom. It's in that kingdom that you are empowered with God's very Spirit, given a position like that of Jesus Himself, and accepted forever by God.