

Who Is The Greatest?  
Luke 9:46-50  
Rev. Alan Rogers

INTRODUCTION:

On February 25, 1964, after beating Sonny Liston for the heavyweight boxing title, 22-year old Cassius Clay stood before reporters and said, "I'm the greatest thing that has ever lived. I'm so great I don't have a mark on my face. I shook up the world...I am the king of the world. You must listen to me! I am the greatest! I can't be beat."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, that was back when one had to actually do something in order to be considered great. In our day, the most popular television genre currently is reality tv. We've created an entire generation of celebrities whose only qualification is being willing to do outlandish things to draw attention to themselves so that other people will watch. Just how self-absorbed does one have to be to make a fool of oneself in front of millions?

This self-centeredness spills over into other areas of society as well. Some of our biggest political battles currently are over who gets what piece of the pie. Many are willing to throw their support behind the candidate that can the most perks to their supporters. We are so intent on getting our place in the line for the gravy train that we don't stop to think about who is paying the gravy.

Our society has an overinflated sense of entitlement and ego. Jesus steps into that picture like a huge straight pen to pop our self-delusions.

## **I. Looking for Greatness in All the Wrong Places**

***A. This exchange between Jesus and his disciples demonstrates how one can be exposed to God's greatest miracles, yet totally miss the point (v. 46).***

**1. This moment came on the heels of some watershed events in the disciples' relationship with Jesus:**

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Kindred, *Sound and Fury: Two Powerful Lives, One Fateful Friendship* (New York:Free Press,2007), 58.

- a) **The moment at Caesarea Philippi where the disciples first understood that Jesus was God's Son and the Anointed Savior (Luke 9:18-22).**
  - b) **The Transfiguration, where some of the disciples were privileged to see a glimpse of Jesus in all of his divine glory (Luke 9:28-36).**
2. **In their time with Jesus, the disciples also had witnessed Jesus demonstrate his divine authority over disease, demons, death, and even nature itself.**
3. **One more than one occasion, Jesus stressed to his disciples that his divine mission required him to suffer, be rejected, and be murdered in order to fulfill God's plan of salvation.**
4. **No sooner had Jesus informed his disciples that God's plan would lead to his death then the disciples began arguing over the inheritance (v. 46).**
- a) **One commentator has called this discussion that "dumbest conversation in the history of the world."<sup>2</sup>**
  - b) **The disciple's were arguing over the pecking order in Jesus' kingdom.**
  - c) **They reasoned that as friends of the Messiah, they would receive privileged posts in the new administration.**
  - d) **They were so focused on what Jesus' identity meant for them that they seemed totally oblivious to the fact that Jesus' path to victory would pass through a cross.**

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Driscoll, "Redeeming Greatness" (sermon, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, WA, August 15, 2010), <http://marshill.com/media/luke/redeeming-greatness> (accessed January 14, 2012).

***B. The disciple's attitudes reveal that they were operating from a warped, ungodly sense of greatness grounded in self-centeredness and self-absorption (v. 46).***

**1. We were made to reflect God's glory, but because of sin the glory we most often attempt to reflect is our own (v. 46).**

**a) Genesis tells us that human beings were created in God's image (Gen. 1:27).**

**b) Part of what it means to be created in God's image is that we are like mirrors designed to reflect God's glory to the rest of the universe.**

**c) However, through sin that "mirror" has been turned back on itself.**

***(1) The temptation that led to humanity's rebellion was the temptation to "be like God." (Gen. 3:5)***

***(2) The original sin of humankind was the attempt to be our own god, deciding for ourselves what was right and wrong.***

***(3) Instead of reflecting God's glory, we tried to replace God with our own image.***

***(4) At the root of every sin is this evil self-centeredness which wants what "I" want, when "I" want it, and however "I" can get it.***

**d) The further we get from God, the more absorbed with ourselves we become.**

***(1) This is why the Apostle Paul says that one of the signs that Judgment Day is approaching is that people will be "lovers of self" (2 Timothy 3:1-3).***

***(2) Have you ever seen a day where people are more stuck on themselves than our day?***

**2. Sinful self-absorption often is manifested in desire to be the center of one's own, and everyone else's, universe (v. 46).**

**a) The more focused we are on ourselves, the more anxious we get when the spotlight is focused somewhere else.**

**b) [Illustration]**

**(1) *British actor Michael Wilding was once asked if actors had any traits which set them apart from other human beings.***

**(2) *"Without a doubt," he replied. "You can pick out actors by the glazed look that comes into their eyes when the conversation wanders away from themselves."<sup>3</sup>***

**c) This is why some people will go to such extreme lengths to draw attention to themselves.**

**(1) *How many times have we said about a misbehaving child, "He's just trying to get attention."***

**(2) *The sad thing is that many adults do the same thing; they just act out in different ways.***

**3. Sinful self-ambition often masks personal pain and profound insecurity (v. 46).**

**a) Some people are self-centered because they've never outgrown it.**

**(1) *As children, we were all characterized by a degree of self-centeredness.***

**(2) *Hopefully, we had parents or other adults in our lives who taught us our limits and helped us see the world through the eyes of others.***

**(3) *Unfortunately, there are some people who seem to get stuck in this infantile selfishness.***

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<sup>3</sup> *Sermonillustrations.com*, s.v. "Self-centered," [http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/self\\_centered.htm](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/self_centered.htm) (accessed January 14, 2012).

**b) Others project self-centeredness in order to mask some trauma or inadequacy in their lives.**

**(1) [Illustration] Story of a Driven Man**

(a) I recently had the opportunity to catch up with an acquaintance who at one time was one of the most driven people I have ever known.

(b) What I did not know, until he revealed it to me, was that the source of his drive was a history of rejection and emotional abuse as a child.

(i) His parents divorced at an early age, which can imprint its own sense of rejection of the psyche of a child.

(ii) Throughout his childhood, significant people constantly told him that they wished he been born a girl.

(iii) For a lot of boys, such a statement could have been devastating, but this man sought to prove his masculinity by overcompensating.

*(a) He worked hard at become the "alpha" male.*

*(b) He was always the loudest and most assertive person in the room.*

*(c) He would do outlandish things just to draw attention to himself.*

*(d) He had to "win" in everything, at all costs.*

(iv) This man's efforts brought him great success in his field, but at a high cost.

*(a) He sometimes came across as arrogant and brash.*

*(b) He had trouble seeing things from the perspective of others.*

*(c) He felt threatened and jealous at the success of people around him.*

(d) *He fought mood-swings and depression all his life.*

(e) *He had no close friends, and experienced problems letting his guard down even in front of his wife.*

(f) *He lived in constant fear that someone would discover his secret—the “real” him.*

**(2) *In ministry, I have encountered many similar people whose record of not getting along with others may be traced to their fixation with their own pain.***

***C. Many of the conflicts within ourselves, and within the church, may be traced ultimately to self-centeredness (v. 46).***

**1. Within ourselves:**

**a) [Quote] From an unknown source comes an article titled, "How To Be Miserable" : "Think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use "I" as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually in the opinion of others. Listen greedily to what people say about you. Expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you have rendered. Shirk your duties if you can. Do as little as possible for others." <sup>4</sup>**

**b) When we become too focused on ourselves:**

**(1) *We reduce the people around us as objects who exist only to meet our needs.***

**(2) *We wear our feelings on our sleeves, and become easily offended.***

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<sup>4</sup> *Sermonillustrations.com*, s.v. "Self-centered," [http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/self\\_centered.htm](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/self_centered.htm) (accessed January 14, 2012).

**(3) Every slight or setback feeds into our paranoia (“They did that just to get at me!”)**

**(4) Our conviction that we alone are right prevents us from realizing that others have a viewpoint of their own.**

**(5) We have trouble cooperating with or experiencing camaraderie with others, except on our terms.**

**2. Within a church:**

**a) (James 4:1) “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?”**

**b) We forget that we exist for a purpose that is bigger than ourselves.**

**c) We forget that we are part of a body, with each part dependent on the other.**

**d) We find it impossible to obey Jesus’ command that we “love our neighbors as ourselves.”**

## **II. Where True Greatness Is Found**

**A. Ironically, the disciples were so wrapped up in their own pursuit of greatness that they missed the obvious answer to their question: the truly great one in their midst was Jesus (vv. 47-48).**

**B. To remind the disciples where true greatness is found, Jesus directed their attention to a child.**

**1. In other contexts, Jesus would say that in order to be part of his kingdom we must become like the child.<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 18:3; Luke 18:17.

2. In this context, Jesus said that in order to understand greatness we had to *receive* the child in his name.

a) While the culture Jesus was born into valued children, a child was not be taken seriously until he became an adult.

(1) *First-century Jewish society valued children but did not idealize children.*

(2) *One rabbi remarked that time spent talking with a child was as much a waste of time as sleeping late and getting drunk in the daytime.<sup>6</sup>*

(3) *In our terms, children were to be seen, not heard.*

b) In that culture, to receive a child as an equal would involve a great deal of humility and self-denial, the same kind of humility we need in order to submit to Jesus (vv. 47-48).

**C. *The greatness that counts does not come from within us, but from our relationship to God through Jesus (v. 48).***

1. If we want to receive, or be made right with, God, we have to receive Jesus.

2. Receiving Jesus means to accept him on the terms He presents us:

a) Jesus is the Son of God, the Anointed One, the Living Lord.

b) In Paul's words, Jesus is the one "given the name above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW." (Philippians 2:8-10)

(1) *"The name" Paul is referring to is an Old Testament way of referring to God.*

(2) *God has stamped Jesus with His own personal name; i.e. Jesus is God's revelation of Himself.*

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<sup>6</sup> Mishnah, *Avot* 3.11; see also Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moises Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 895.

**(3) This means that Jesus is deserving of our worship, and when we worship Jesus we are worshipping God.**

**c) To borrow another of Paul's phrases, when we "confess Jesus as Lord" (Romans 10:9-10), we submit to Jesus' authority, taking the focus off of ourselves and placing it on him.**

**(1) We must acknowledge to ourselves and others that it is not about us, but all about Him.**

**(2) We must come to grips with the fact that we are simply "jars of clay", and that "the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." (2 Cor. 2:7)**

**D. When we truly comprehend the gracious acceptance God offers to us through Jesus, we are able to extend that same acceptance to others (vv. 49-50).**

- 1. John's real beef was because the man was serving Jesus outside of the approval and authority of the disciples.**
- 2. Jesus reminds us that He is the one who determines who is and is not on the team.**
- 3. When we have Jesus in common, and the focus is on Him and not on ourselves, we can get along.**

## **CONCLUSION:**

Who is the greatest in your life right now? Is your focus on Jesus, or on yourself? Is there some secret pain in your life that keeps drawing your focus inward, preventing you from putting the focus of your life squarely on Jesus fully and completely? God wants to set you free from self-centeredness and self-absorption, so He can create in you that beautiful work that He designed you for, even before you were born. Come to Jesus. Say to Him, "Lord, I don't want to be the center anymore. Help me to give you the place you rightfully deserve in my life."

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