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RELATIONAL LESSONS FOR CHRISTIAN SERVICE

Luke 9:46-56

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Luke Lesson 47

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Luke 9:46-56

We live in a world of angry people. Road rage is on the increase. Americans on both sides are angry about whether or not to impeach President Clinton. Feminists are angry. Last month, angry homosexuals were blaming the murder of a homosexual in Wyoming by a couple of bar thugs on conservative Christians who speak out against homosexuality as sin! We frequently hear reports about anger spilling over into domestic violence. As if all this anger were not enough, people sign up for classes in assertiveness training so that they can learn to stand up for their rights!

Uncontrolled anger is as old as Cain and Abel. Down through the centuries, even believers have justified their anger as righteous when it was not even close. On a couple of recorded instances, Jesus was righteously angry, so it is possible. But we all would do well to heed the words of the Scottish hymn writer, George Matheson, who said, "There are times when I do well to be angry, but I often mistake the times." If we want to be effective servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, we must learn to put aside anger and be humble and loving, even toward those who oppose us.

The disciples needed to learn this lesson. Our text tells of how they got in an argument among themselves as to which of them might be the greatest. It sounds awfully childish and dumb, but we would be blind if we did not see ourselves in their behavior. Every pastor knows of squabbles that have divided churches because one person was hurt that he was not properly recognized for his service to the church. People leave churches because they didn't get their way on what color to paint the fellowship hall! Sometimes we hide our conflicts under the banner of doctrinal disputes, often over minor issues, but when you look behind the banner, it is really two sides shouting, "I'm the greatest!" "No, I'm the greatest!"

We also read of the apostle John trying to hinder a man who was doing the Lord's work, but he wasn't a part of their team. Je-

Jesus corrects this misguided zeal. Then we read of James and John wanting to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village that was not willing to receive Jesus and His followers. Again, Jesus rebukes them for their lack of love. These three incidents in the disciples' training teach us that,

To be effective servants of Christ, we must learn the lessons of humility and of love for all.

The argument about who is the greatest disciple (9:46-48) teaches the lesson of humility. The incidents of opposing the servant of Christ who was not a part of the apostolic band (9:49-50) and of calling fire down from heaven on the Samaritan village (9:51-56) teach us the lesson of love for our fellow believers and love even for those who oppose us.

There is a major sectional division in Luke at 9:51, but I am joining the two halves in one message because they contain a common theme. From Luke 4:14 through 9:50, Luke's theme is the ministry of the Son of Man in Galilee. Luke progressively unfolds the person of Jesus as the Son of God. From 9:51 through 19:28, we see the rejection of Jesus, the Son of Man, as He sets His face toward Jerusalem. There is mounting opposition against Jesus (9:51-11:54) and He gives much instruction (there are 17 parables in this section) in light of His approaching death (12:1-19:27). Luke does not describe a journey to Jerusalem in a straight, sequential sense, but rather he presents a shift of focus on Jesus' part that culminates in the rejection and crucifixion in Jerusalem. It is in light of His approaching death that Jesus focuses on teaching the twelve. There are many lessons on effective Christian service.

1. To be effective servants of Christ, we must learn the lesson of humility (9:46-48).

The context of Luke heightens the absurdity of this debate among the disciples. Jesus has just announced His impending death (9:44) and He is about to set His face to go to that fate in Jerusalem (9:51). Sandwiched between these solemn pronouncements, the disciples bicker about which of them is the greatest! We will again encounter a similar episode at the Last Supper (22:24). But before we shake our heads and say, "How could they do that?" we need to acknowledge that we

are made of the same fabric as the disciples; we struggle against the same problems. The fact that they got into a similar dispute on the eve of the crucifixion should also warn us that this isn't a lesson that you learn once and store away in your file cabinet. It is a lesson that we must constantly apply.

Why did the disciples get into this argument about who was the greatest at this time? I can't be dogmatic, but I have a hunch that it may have stemmed from the incidents just preceding. Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John with Him to the Mount of Transfiguration, leaving the other nine in the valley below, where they hadn't been able to cast the demon out of the boy. Although Jesus had commanded Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone what they had seen on the mountain until after His resurrection, they probably felt privileged for what they had seen there. Perhaps some of the nine were thinking, "Why is that blabbermouth Peter in the inner circle? And why does Jesus pick those hotheaded brothers, James and John? I'm a much better disciple than they are!" And perhaps Peter, James, and John were thinking, "If these guys had seen what we saw, they wouldn't have any problem casting out that demon! They just need to get their act together!" So there was rivalry and competition among the twelve.

What can we learn here about pride and humility?

A. Pride begins in the heart and must be dealt with on the heart level.

Jesus knew "what they were thinking in their heart" (9:47). Pride was at the root of the original sin, where Eve thought that she could be like God if she disobeyed Him and ate the forbidden fruit. It is at the root of almost all sin, because we proudly think that we know better than God who has given us His commandments. We wrongly think that we know what is best for us, even if it goes against what God has clearly said. So to deal with pride, we must confess our selfish rebellion against God and humble ourselves before Him. If God gave us what we deserve, we would go straight to hell! We must repent of pride and seek His grace.

Also, dealing with pride on the heart level means examining our motives for what we do. Why do I serve Christ? Is it out of love and gratitude to Him, or is it to be recognized by others?

What happens if I don't receive the recognition that I think I deserve? Do I get hurt feelings and quit? Do I grow jealous of those who seem to be in the limelight? Or, do I truly rejoice with the success of other servants of the Lord because the name of the Lord is being glorified?

So often we're like Linus in the Peanuts cartoon strip. His sister, Lucy, asks him what he wants to be when he grows up. He replies that he wants to be a humble country doctor. He says that he will live in the city and every day he will get in his sports car and drive to the country where he will heal everyone. In the last frame he says that he will be a world-famous humble little country doctor. So often, in our hearts we want to be world-famous humble servants of Jesus!

B. Pride is fed by competition; humility is fed by cooperation.

There can only be one "greatest" disciple, and the way you determine the winner is by making comparisons. But Jesus totally disarms this way of thinking. He makes no comparisons among the twelve, or between them and anyone else. The apostle Paul does the same thing with the factious Corinthians when he says, "What do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). In other words, God has given us everything that we are and have. We are only stewards or managers of it for His sake. Since it all comes from Him, it is ridiculous for us to be puffed up over our own gifts or abilities and to look down on others who don't have what we have.

As Americans, we especially have to be on guard because our culture thrives on competition, not cooperation. We want to win, even (or, especially!) if it means crushing our opponents and making them look bad. If we promote teamwork, it's only so that *our* team beats the other team. Imagine the idea of all the teams in the National Football League cooperating so that everyone ended the season as winners!

I read a great story about a missionary to the Philippines who was trying to teach a remote native tribe how to play croquet. He explained the rules and showed them how they could knock their

opponents' ball away. But these people lived in a culture that survived through cooperation, not competition. They were confused: why would you want to smash your opponent's ball out of the court? "So you can win," the missionary explained.

But these "primitive" tribesmen, playing in their loincloths, wouldn't do it. After the first man got his ball through all the wickets, he went back and coached the others on how to do it. Finally, when the last man hit his ball through the last wicket, they all jumped up and down and shouted, "We won! We won!"

That's the spirit we need if we want to avoid pride and promote humility. Paul wrote to the rivals in the church at Philippi, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4). Rather than being jealous because someone else has some spiritual experience or recognition that we lack, we should rejoice because the Lord's team has won.

C. Pride is fed by our association with the "important"; humility is fed by our association with the "lowly."

The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest disciple of Jesus. At this point, Jesus was riding a wave of popularity. Crowds thronged around Him wherever He went. When Jesus was arrested and about to be crucified, it was a different story: they all left Him and fled. But for now, it made them feel important to be identified with Jesus.

To correct their pride, Jesus took a child and stood him at His side. In the Judaism of that day, a child under 12 could not be taught the Torah, and so to spend time with them was considered a waste (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], 5:646-647). But Jesus was showing that His followers must welcome and be kind to those whom society regarded as unimportant. Not only was this child not unimportant; by receiving ones such as this, Jesus' disciples actually receive Him and the Father who sent Him. This shows us God's concern for every person, no matter how unimportant our society may regard him or her. And it shows us that if we think we're something because we know some "impor-

tant” people, our focus is wrong. The only thing that makes us “something” is our association with Jesus, and that isn’t because of anything good in us, but only by His undeserved grace.

D. Humility grows when we focus on Christ’s omniscient presence and on the cross.

Perhaps there were some obvious non-verbal signs that showed Jesus what the disciples were discussing. But 9:47 indicates that He had supernatural knowledge of what they were thinking. Scripture tells us that there is nothing hid from His sight (Heb. 4:13). He knows every proud and jealous thought we entertain. If we would only keep that in mind, we would be quick to judge our proud thoughts the second we recognized them!

Also, as I mentioned, this debate about who is the greatest occurs in the context of the cross (9:44, 51). If we would keep in view the suffering that Jesus went through to save us from our sins, how could we go on exalting ourselves over others? It was my pride and selfishness that put the sinless Savior on the cross. As Isaac Watts put it in his great hymn,

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

So to grow in our usefulness to the Savior, we must grow in humility and judge our pride.

2. To be effective servants of Christ, we must learn the lesson of love for all (9:49-56).

There are two groups represented here: those who are fellow servants of Christ (9:49-50); and, those who are opposed to Christ (9:51-56). We must learn to show love to both groups, although the form our love takes may differ.

A. Love for all means being tolerant with fellow servants of Jesus Christ (9:49-50).

I hesitated before I used the word “tolerant,” since it is a greatly misused word. It seems to be the supreme virtue in our country right now, and there is a correct sense in which tolerance is a virtue. The word is used wrongly as a means of opening the door

to any and every kind of sin. In this wrong sense, we are told that it is arrogant for us to say that any behavior or belief is wrong; all beliefs and behavior are neutrally the same. In this sense of the word, Christians cannot be “tolerant.” We must hold firmly to sound doctrine and to biblical standards of morality. But in the correct sense, the word tolerant means treating those who differ from us with kindness, courtesy, and respect. I am using the word in this sense when I say that we must be tolerant with our fellow servants of Christ.

I don't know whether John here was seeking to justify himself or whether he was confessing his sin in light of Jesus' teaching about the least being the great. But he tells Jesus that they had encountered someone casting out demons in Jesus' name (probably on their first preaching tour), and they tried to hinder him because he wasn't a part of their group. Jesus corrected John, “Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you.” On another occasion, Jesus said, “He who is not with Me is against Me” (11:23). Obviously, Jesus was not contradicting Himself. Rather (as several commentators observe), the second verse is one by which a person should test himself: if I am not fully committed to Jesus Christ, I am His enemy. To be neutral is to be against Him. But the verse in our text is one by which we test others: we should treat him as an ally unless he is obviously against us.

We would be wrong to conclude from this verse that we should join forces with everyone professing the name of Christ, no matter what their doctrine or practice. Some doctrinal differences are very serious and we must not compromise sound doctrine (Gal. 1:6-9). Some methods or practices by professing Christians mandate that we not work closely with them. But the warning of this verse is that we often cloak our pride of being right under the banner of religious zeal. God is bigger than our exclusive circles, and He uses people in His service whom we would not pick.

This opens up a subject that could easily require a whole sermon series. But let me briefly offer a few guidelines on when we should or should not work with other professing Christians. On a church level, it would be wrong to identify our church in a public manner with any church or group that denied fundamental doctrines of the gospel. To join in worship or outreach with a church

that denies the substitutionary atonement of Christ or that we are saved by grace through faith alone would be wrong. To have our church join a unity service with liberal churches that deny the sinfulness of the human race or the need for the saving grace of Christ would be to compromise the gospel.

Also, there are times when it is not wise to work closely with other Christian groups even though they do hold to the fundamentals. Paul and Barnabas separated over the matter of whether to take Mark along with them on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-41). Obviously, some matters are more significant than others and so we must pray for discernment and seek to obey Scripture. The main thing is to guard against pride and to be kind and gracious when we must disagree or separate from other professing Christians because of different principles.

B. Love for all means allowing God to deal with those who oppose (9:51-56).

As Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem, He sent messengers ahead into Samaria to make arrangements. But the Samaritans did not receive Him because they heard that He was going to Jerusalem, and they despised the Jews. There had been a centuries-long hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans, who were viewed as religious half-breeds. So the slightest provocation set off James and John who wanted to call down fire to consume these pagans. But Jesus rebuked them and they went on to another village. (The most reliable manuscripts omit the bracketed words of Jesus' rebuke, and those that have them contain many variants.)

This incident shows our propensity to misuse the Scriptures to justify our own sinful anger. James and John thought that they were acting in the spirit of Elijah, who called down fire to consume the wicked King Ahaziah's messengers who came to arrest him (2 Kings 1:1-16). They could cite chapter and verse to show that their anger was justified. But, they were wrong. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, not to destroy them.

While rejection is always difficult to handle, if our Lord was rejected, we can expect the same treatment in this wicked world. He deliberately steeled Himself for the coming rejection in Jerusa-

lem (9:51). As His followers, we must steel ourselves for rejection and not take it personally, even if it is meant that way.

We should let the Lord be the judge. In this case, Jesus judged this village by leaving them in their state of rejection. They would have to answer to God at the judgment for not welcoming Christ into their village. While there is a proper time to “shake the dust off our feet” in protest against those who reject the gospel (9:5), we should be careful not to jump the gun. God is patient, not willing for any to perish (2 Pet. 3:9), and we must reflect His love and patience toward those who are opposed, praying that God would grant them repentance.

Conclusion

Living as we do in a culture that is seething with anger and that elevates pride to a virtue, we can have some great opportunities for witness if we will learn the lessons of humility and love for others. If you are mistreated, but you respond with humility and love, you will stand out as a light in the darkness. Be ready to let others know that it is only Christ in you that makes the difference.

If you struggle with pride and anger and have failed often, these verses offer hope. James and John were known as the Sons of Thunder. Matthew Henry observes that here they even want to add lightning to their repertoire! But James went on to give up his life as a martyr and John grew to be known as the Apostle of Love. If the grace of the Lord Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit could change these hotheads, there is hope for us all! Change begins when we acknowledge our sin and come to the cross in repentance. We should walk in the same way (Col. 2:6). If you have wronged someone through pride or anger, humble yourself, go and ask their forgiveness. As you learn to practice humility and love, even toward those who have wronged you, you will become an effective servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Often we're blind to our pride. How can we spot it and learn true humility?
2. Is competition always wrong? When is it out of balance? What can we do in a competitive society to learn cooperation?
3. How can we know whether to separate from other professing Christians or to overlook differences and be unified?
4. When is it right to defend the gospel or the Bible against unbelievers? How can we do it strongly and yet in love?

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