

REDISCOVER JESUS, PART 32: “JESUS THE GREATEST”
LUKE 9:46-50
PASTOR ERIC YEE

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone. If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

Over the last four weeks, we took a bit of a break from our “Rediscover Jesus” sermon series through the Gospel account of Luke, but today we'll be resuming it with Part 32.

So let's get right into today's sermon: “Jesus the Greatest.”

Sermon Introduction

Have you ever had a sense of privilege turn into a sense of pride?

Perhaps you once felt *thankful* that God gave you the means to live where you live, have what you have, and do what you do, but somewhere down the line, you not only feel *entitled* to everything God has given you, but start to feel like it's not enough.

Perhaps you once felt *unworthy* to be accepted into a prestigious school, sports team, or company, but somewhere down the line, you not only started to feel *worthy* to be there, but you started looking down at others who you didn't think should be there.

Pride so subtle creeps in that we don't even notice it. It's been said that “Pride is the sin we cannot see in ourselves and yet so detest in others.”¹

We're often quick to spot pride, arrogance, or haughtiness in others—and we hate it—yet we often don't notice the same repulsive pride in ourselves.²

So that's what we're going to look at more in today's sermon.

The One Thing

***Beware of privilege turning into pride,
but fix your eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ.***

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Luke 9:46-50.

Just want to give a bit of context before jumping into today's passage.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke*, rev. ed., PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

² I would highly recommend reading a brief essay by Jonathan Edwards entitled “Undetected Spiritual Pride” (<https://www.edparton.com/blog/pride-edwards.html>), which is also summarized in Fabienne Harford, “Seven Subtle Symptoms of Pride,” *Desiring God*, July 15, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/seven-subtle-symptoms-of-pride>.

At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus gave his twelve apostles power and authority over *all* demons and to cure diseases and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God, which they did all throughout the region of Galilee.

But later on, as Jesus took three of his apostles—Peter, James, and John—up a mountain with him to pray and to witness his transfiguration, the *rest* of his twelve apostles were below the mountain trying to cast out a demon from a boy, but none of them could do it.

When Jesus came down the mountain, he attributed his disciples' inability to cast out the demon to their *deficient* faith. And so, Jesus *himself* casts out the demon from the boy and gave him back to his father. And then, Jesus foretold his death to his apostles for a *second* time, but they didn't understand what he was saying and they were too afraid to ask him about it.

And that's where we are in today's passage.

Scripture Reading

Let's read Luke 9:46-50.

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

⁴⁹ John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." ⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you."

This is God's Word.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in two parts.

When privilege turns into pride, and we lose sight of the greatest, Jesus Christ, we will have two destructive tendencies:

- I. The tendency to *exalt ourselves* (vv. 46-48)
- II. The tendency to be *exclusive* (vv. 49-50)

I. The tendency to *exalt ourselves* (vv. 46-48)

Verse 46 says this:

⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.

In the Mark parallel account, we find out that this argument arose while they were on their way to Capernaum (Mark 9:33).

So imagine the scene. Jesus has *just* told his twelve apostles for a *second* time that he's going to suffer and die. They didn't understand what Jesus meant by that and they were too afraid to ask, so the natural thing that we would *expect* is that they would discuss it *among themselves* to try to understand what Jesus was talking about.

But that's *not* their topic of discussion at all. On the way to Capernaum, they're busy talking about "which of them was the greatest."

In some sense, they were *all* supposedly *already* “great” because they were all *handpicked* apostles of Jesus. But that’s not enough for them, but they want to know who the *greatest* apostle is.

And it says that “an *argument* arose among them.”

When I think of an argument between people, I don’t think of a calm and quiet environment, but I think of a tense and even loud environment. But this wasn’t just an argument between *two* people, but this was between *twelve* apostles who were *all* trying to one-up each other to prove that *they’re* the greatest apostle of all.

We don’t know *exactly* what they said to one another, but just the *topic* of their argument already tells us a lot.

Imagine *you* are one of the apostles and you have the goal of proving that *you* are the *greatest* among the Twelve. How would you go about it?

On some level, you would need to *belittle* 11 other people, who are simultaneously trying to belittle you. As much as you’re trying to prove that *you* are the *greatest*, you are simultaneously trying to prove that the *other* 11 apostles are *worse* than you.

Maybe it’s my own sinfulness, but I don’t know how in the world you could argue that *you* are the greatest apostle among them without getting *personal* and *petty*.

- Perhaps Peter, James, and John argued that *they* were the greatest because they *personally* witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountaintop, while the *other* apostles were busy below the mountain, *failing* at trying to cast a demon out of a boy (Luke 9:28-40).
- And *among* Peter, James, and John, perhaps *Peter* argued that *he* was the greatest because *he* was the one who first confessed that Jesus is the Christ of God (Luke 9:20).
- But then, perhaps James and John *reminded* Peter of how he was babbling *nonsense* about making tents on the mount of transfiguration (Luke 9:33).

And what’s crazy to me is that this is *not* the *only* time that they have this argument. But even after *everything* Jesus says to them in response to this, which we’ll look at in a bit, the apostles have this *same* argument *again* right before Jesus’ death on the cross.

On the night before Jesus’ crucifixion, right after having the Last Supper where Jesus told them how his blood would be poured out for them to establish the new covenant, his apostles were *still* arguing about “which of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Luke 22:24).

But before we start *judging* the apostles as terribly self-centered and arrogant people, we should realize that *we* do this *all the time*.

We may *not* outright argue about being the greatest, but in our hearts, we’re constantly *comparing* ourselves to one another and we’re constantly *evaluating* our greatness based on how we think we measure up to those around us.

And when we think about all the reasons we might think we’re great, it can get quite *personal* and *petty*.

- “I make more money than others.”
- “I look better than others.”
- “I work harder than others.”
- “I’m more loving and kind than others.”
- “I know more about the Bible than others.”
- “I serve in the church more than others.”
- “I walk faster and drive better than others.”

The options of how we do this are *endless*. We *all* have a sinful tendency to exalt ourselves over others in *some* way.

But if we’re *repulsed* by the pride that we see in the *apostles* here, then we should *also* be *repulsed* by the pride that we see in our *own* hearts.

If *others* were to *belittle* you and get *personal* and *petty* with you, would you not be *angry* or *annoyed* to say the least? Yet when you examine your *own* thoughts, do you *belittle* others and get *personal* and *petty* with them?

In your heart of hearts, as soon as you hear yourself think some version of “I’m *better* than that person” or “What’s *wrong* with that person?”, then you are doing the very thing that you *despise*.

And this pride in us isn’t just towards *others*, but it’s also towards *God*.

Pride is present in *every* sin because in every sin, we are essentially saying, “I know better than you, God; I’ll do it my own way instead of following your Word” or “What’s wrong with you, God? You’re clearly not sovereign or not caring.”

Such is the heart of pride. We exalt *ourselves* and we belittle *others*—even God.

Going back to the scene, just imagine you’re *Jesus* for a moment. You have just told your apostles that you’re going to be killed, and none of them is asking you more about that. Instead, as you’re walking a bit ahead of them on the way to Capernaum, all you hear behind you is your twelve apostles cutting down each other and exalting themselves above one another.

Notice the contrast. *Jesus* is thinking about *others* and dying for them on the cross, but all his *apostles* can think about is *themselves* and which of them was the greatest.

If you’re *Jesus*, would that argument among your apostles be *music* to your ears or the sound of *nails* on a chalkboard?

I imagine *Jesus* *cringing* at the sound of their pride. It is *so far* from the heart of our Lord and Savior. He is *not* pleased in any way by their pointless, destructive bickering.

So how does *Jesus* respond to his apostles?

Verses 47-48 say this:

⁴⁷ But *Jesus*, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side ⁴⁸ and 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.”

In the eyes of his *apostles*, *Jesus* puts two things together that are *not* on the same level—*himself* and a *child*.

In the apostles’ minds, *Jesus* is the greatest. He is “the Christ of God” (Luke 9:20)—he is the promised Messianic King and the main reason that any of them would think of themselves as great. The only reason they’re even arguing about being the greatest among themselves is because *Jesus* called them to be *his* apostles to begin with. In other words, their *source* of greatness comes from their *association* with *Jesus*.

But a child was the *least* and the *lowest* in the minds of those in their society. With high infant mortality rates and high demand for human labor, both Greek and Jewish societies at the time did *not* value children until they could contribute to the labor force.³ Children were the lowest rung on the societal ladder. To spend your time with children was regarded to be a colossal waste of time.⁴

³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

⁴ R. Kent Hughes (*Luke*, rev. ed., PTW [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013]) notes: “The *Talmud* regarded spending time with children to be a waste of time. One rabbi wrote: “Morning sleep, mid-day wine, chattering with children and tarrying in places where men of the common people assemble, destroy a man” (Ab. 3,10:R. Dosa b. Archinos). Keeping company with children added nothing to a man, it was said. Later in Luke (18:15) we see that the disciples considered *Jesus* too important to receive children and attempted to send them away. The disciples undoubtedly thought (in line with their culture) that greatness is determined by the company one keeps—the great associate with the great and deal with matters of great significance, and children are not great or significant.”

But Jesus put a child “by his side.” If you were an invited guest to a dinner, the host would only welcome those he considered to be his social equal or someone whose honor was above his own. Children might be called to wash the feet of the guests, but they would *never* be *invited* guests.⁵ But here, Jesus puts a child in the greatest seat of prominence—“by his side.”

This is the prominence that the mother of James and John later requested of Jesus—for each of them to sit at his right side and left side in his kingdom (Matt. 20:20-21; cf. Mark 10:35-37).

So for Jesus to put a child “by his side” was a paradigm-shattering lesson for his apostles. He does *not* follow the world’s standards for status, social relations, and greatness, but he *undermines* and *overturns* them.

Now there are at least three lessons that we can glean from what Jesus does and says here that address the tendency to exalt ourselves.

First, receive the lowly.

[⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side ⁴⁸ and 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.”

Three lessons to address the tendency to exalt ourselves:

1. Receive the lowly.]

The lesson isn’t so much “be like this *child*” as it is “be like *Jesus* who receives this child.” It’s the idea of *association*. The apostles thought *they* were *great* because of their *association* with Jesus. But *Jesus* associates with the *lowly*.

So Jesus is challenging them, “If you truly believe that I am the greatest and you want to be like me, then you need to associate with the lowly.”

The logic is quite simple: If *Jesus* associates with the lowly, and we *follow* Jesus, then we will associate with the lowly.

So a natural question for all of us is this: “Who are the people around me?”

If all our friends and all the people around us are “great” in the eyes of the world—the well-off, the educated, the accomplished, the comfortable—then we are not yet the men and women that Jesus would want us to be.

Rather, Christ calls us to *relate* with and *receive* those the world would marginalize—the poor, the uneducated, the handicapped, the sojourners, the struggling.⁶

Jesus goes on to further explain by basically saying: “If you receive this child in my name, then it *indicates* that you have received me. And if you have received me, then it *indicates* that you have received God the Father who sent me.”

As believers in Jesus Christ, this should be *sobering* for us because this is essentially an issue of *assurance* of salvation.

Yes, we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, but what *assurance* do we have that we *truly* believe in Christ?

Scripture tells us to look at our lives. We are *not* saved by our works, but if we *truly* believe in Christ, then *that* genuine faith will always be accompanied by ever increasing good works that accord with the character of Christ.

⁵ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke*, rev. ed., PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

And so, in this instance, if we see that the people around us *include* those the world would regard as “least,” then we have greater *assurance* that we *truly* believe in Christ as our Lord and Savior.

But if we see that *everyone* around us is “great” in the eyes of the world, then we should feel a bit of uneasiness because that’s *not* how Christ has called us to live. And so, we should seek to develop relationships with those the world would marginalize.

To be clear, we are *not* obligated to relate with and receive *every* marginalized person in our society. All of us would be crushed by the weight of that unattainable standard.

Rather, who are the marginalized that are *closest* in proximity to you?⁷ How do you see and treat the black sheep of your family, the minorities in our church, the office boy at your workplace, the helpers in your house, the driver of your car, the waiter at the restaurant, the poor on the side of the street?

For some, we may be able to develop more personal relationships with them as we have more frequent context with them and can engage them in more intentional conversations. And I hope that we’d be willing to introduce them to other friends and *not* be embarrassed to associate ourselves with them, for Christ was never embarrassed to associate himself with all kinds of people the world had no time for.

For others, we may only be able to speak kindly to them and express our appreciation to them. And this is not just being polite, but it is *humanizing* them and treating them as people made in God’s image whose worth is not given by some other arbitrary standard that this world assigns for them.

Also, to be clear, this is *not* about pitying people, but this is about loving and following Jesus. We are to receive the lowly and marginalized “*in [Jesus’] name*,” so our *motivation* is Jesus, our *empowerment* is Jesus, and our *desire* is that we would represent Jesus accurately to others.

So receive the lowly.

Second, recognize that *you* are lowly.

[⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side ⁴⁸ and 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.”

Three lessons to address the tendency to exalt ourselves:

1. Receive the lowly.
2. Recognize that you are lowly.]

Jesus goes on to say, “For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.”

Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “For he who receives this child in my name is the one who is great.” No, he says, “For he who *is* least among you all is the one who is great.” That means that it’s *not just* that you need to *associate* with the lowly, but you need to see and understand *yourself* to be lowly. *You* are least.

Now this is the complete *opposite* of what the apostles were doing earlier. They were arguing about who was the *greatest* among them, but Jesus is telling them that the person who is *great* is the *least* among them all.

But of course, *none* of them were arguing who was the *least*. In fact, if they all truly understood *themselves* to be the *least*, then there wouldn’t have been any argument at all.

Now what’s interesting is that when the apostles *first* encountered Jesus, they *knew* that they were lowly.

⁷ See Kevin DeYoung, “Stewardship, Obligation, and the Poor,” 9Marks, July 1, 2012, <http://www.9marks.org/journal/obligation-stewardship-and-poor>; see also Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 183–186, 225.

For Peter, when he first encountered Jesus on his fishing boat, he fell down at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8).

The apostles were *nobodies*—worse, they were *sinners*—but Jesus called them out of crowd to set them apart as his twelve apostles (Luke 6:12-16). And when Jesus first gave them his power and authority to begin casting out demons, healing the sick, and proclaiming the kingdom of God, I imagine they understood it as *all* grace and *all* privilege. They *knew* they were undeserving.

But somewhere down the line, their sense of undeserved privilege twisted into unimaginable pride. They stopped seeing and understanding themselves as *lowly* and started seeing and understanding themselves as *great*.

As they walked closely with Jesus and participated in his ministry, they started thinking to themselves, "I'm great. I'm spiritual. I'm close with Jesus." And they started taking all the grace and privilege for granted, and they started to *pride* themselves in their close association with Jesus and all their past experiences and accomplishments.

And when they did that, they lost that sense of privilege and they lost their recognition of "I'm a nobody; I'm a sinner that doesn't deserve to be in Jesus' presence."

And as soon as they did that, they would no longer *receive* the lowly because they no longer saw *themselves* as lowly anymore.

In other words, *if* you recognize that you are lowly, then you *will* receive the lowly. You will associate with the lowly *not* out of pity but out of camaraderie. When you see the marginalized, you will not avoid them like the rest of the world, but you will draw near to them just as Christ drew near to you—a lowly sinner.

So recognize that you are lowly.

Third, fix your eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ.

[⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side ⁴⁸ and 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."

Three lessons to address the tendency to exalt ourselves:

1. Receive the lowly.
2. Recognize that you are lowly.
3. Fix your eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ.]

The only way that you can recognize that you are lowly is when you fix your eyes on the greatest.

I can assure you that Peter did not go around falling at people's knees, saying to them, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man." In fact, *before* Jesus came along, he probably had a tendency to think the *opposite*: "Depart from me, for *you* are a sinful man."

But it's only when he encountered the *greatest* person the world has ever known that he fell to his knees in *humility*.

Nothing humbles you more than realizing that you stand before greatness.

You may think you're the greatest soccer player among your friends, but as soon as Cristiano Ronaldo or Lionel Messi walk on the field, you're suddenly humbled.

And you know what humbles you *even more*? When you stand before greatness and they *themselves* are humble.

I can't speak for Ronaldo or Messi because I've never met them, but I can speak for Jesus because I've met him in God's Word.

And in Matthew 11:29, Jesus says of himself, "I am *gentle* and *lowly* in heart." The *greatest* person the world has ever known was also the *humblest* person the world has ever known. Throughout his earthly life, from his *birth* to his *burial*, Jesus was *gentle* and *lowly* in heart.

Chuck Colson, author of *Kingdoms in Conflict*, writes this about Jesus:

He served others first; He spoke to those to whom no one spoke; He dined with the lowest members of society; He touched the untouchables. He had no throne, no crown, no bevy of servants or armored guards. A borrowed manger and a borrowed tomb framed His earthly life.

Kings and presidents and prime ministers surround themselves with minions who rush ahead, swing the doors wide, and stand at attention as they wait for the great to pass. Jesus said that He Himself stands at the door and knocks, patiently waiting to enter our lives.⁸

When we fix our eyes upon the *greatest*, we ought to recognize that *we* are *lowly*. And even more, when the *greatest* is also the *humblest*, how could we ever remain proud and exalt ourselves over others?

And *yet*, here we have the twelve apostles, who walked *so closely* with Jesus and who could *literally* fix their eyes on the greatest every single day ... and they are unimaginably proud and exalting themselves over each other.

What happened to them? Even though they were *literally* following and seeing the greatest and the humblest, their eyes were *not* fixed on him. Rather, their eyes were fixed on themselves, other people, their experiences and accomplishments. Privilege turned into pride, and they began to exalt themselves over one another.

This should be a huge warning for us. If the apostles could slip into such repulsive pride, then so can we.

The tendency to exalt ourselves over others comes when we forget who we are in light of the greatest, Jesus Christ, and the grace and privilege we have received from him.

So first, the tendency to *exalt ourselves*; and second...

II. The tendency to be exclusive (vv. 49-50)

Verse 49 says this:

⁴⁹ John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us."

So Jesus *exposed* the apostles' pride and helped them to see that *none* of them are *that* great, let alone the *greatest*.

And rather than answer in *humility*, John "answers" Jesus with *more pride* by essentially saying, "Well, what about *that* guy? Surely we're better than *that* guy."

John tells Jesus about how he and the rest of the apostles tried to stop someone from casting out demons in Jesus' name, but then, notice the *reason* he gives.

He doesn't say, "because he does not follow *you*," but he says, "because he does not follow *with us*." John's main concern is *not* any false teaching or any ungodliness in the life of the person that may misrepresent Jesus, but his main concern is that this person is *not* one of the *apostles*—"he's *not* one of *us*."

⁸ Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (New York/Grand Rapids, MI: William Morrow/Zondervan, 1987), 85, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Luke*, rev. ed., PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

In a sense, John was trying to salvage some sense of greatness—at least by the world’s definition. If *he* can’t be the greatest among the *apostles*, he wants to know that the *apostles* are still greater than *that* guy.

He wants greatness to be *exclusive* to the apostles—they as *apostles* are *exclusively* great, and everyone else is *subordinate* to, or *below*, their own greatness.

John is basically arguing the *same* thing but on a *group* level. Before, he was arguing that *he* as an *individual* was the greatest, but now he’s arguing that the *apostles* as a *group* are the greatest. Nothing has really changed in “the reasoning of [John’s heart].” He *still* wants to be great by *belittling* others and getting *personal* and *petty*.

We get a sense of how *petty* this was when we think about what it meant for this man to cast out demons in Jesus’ name.

In the passage immediately before this and from its parallel accounts, we get a graphic and terrible picture of how tormenting it was for a boy to be possessed by a demon. The boy would suddenly scream as the demon would seize him (Mark 9:18; Luke 9:39). He would be thrown to the ground in convulsions and start foaming at the mouth (Mark 9:18; Luke 9:39, 42). He would grind his teeth and become stiff as a board (Mark 9:18). The demon often cast him into fire and into water (Matt. 17:15), so he probably has terrible burns and scars. And the demon made him deaf and mute whenever it possessed him (Mark 9:25), so that he could not hear or speak with anyone.

And in describing the boy’s tormenting experience, his father said that the spirit “*shatters* him,” which literally means that “it is *crushing* him together”⁹—or he’s being crushed or broken into pieces.

So for this non-apostle to be casting out demons in Jesus’ name, it meant that he was *freeing* people from *that* kind of torment.

But as the apostles witness all this happening, they don’t *rejoice* that God can use *others* to advance his kingdom purposes, but they get *upset* that a *non-apostle* is doing it and they try to *stop* him.¹⁰

Just imagine this in a different context.

- This would be like firefighters rebuking civilians for rescuing people from a burning building.
- This would be like police officers rebuking civilians for stopping a robbery or an attempted murder.
- This would be like lifeguards rebuking civilians for diving into the pool to rescue a drowning baby.

Everyone else is *thanking* the civilians for rescuing them or their loved ones, but the “authorities” are *not* rejoicing in the salvation and restoration that has occurred, but they’re so consumed with the fact that the person who did the rescuing wasn’t one of them.

That’s the kind of pettiness we’re seeing here with the apostles. Demons are being cast out! Lives are being saved! Families are being restored! And while everyone else is *rejoicing*, they’re busy *rebuking* the one who cast out the demons simply because he wasn’t one of them.

Of course, the irony in all this is that, in the previous passage, the apostles *themselves* could *not* cast out the demon from the boy. So I’m sure there’s some sense of embarrassment and jealousy that this *non-apostle* is doing what they could *not* do.

At the end of the day, this was *not* about *Jesus* and advancing his kingdom purposes, but this was about the *apostles* and preserving their own sense of exclusive greatness.

So how does Jesus respond to John and his apostles?

⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke*, rev. ed. PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

¹⁰ The original Greek has more of the sense of “we *kept* stopping him” (Leon L. Morris, *Luke*, TNTC 3 [Nottingham, England: IVP, 2008]). James R. Edwards (*The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015]) also notes: “The imperfect tense of “hindering” (Gk. *ekōlyomen*) implies that John’s response was habitual in such instances.”

Verse 50 says this:

⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”

Now there are at least three lessons that we can glean from what Jesus says here that address the tendency to be exclusive.

First, recognize your true enemy.

[⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”]

Three lessons to address the tendency to be exclusive:

1. Recognize your true enemy.]

Now it’s true that the man had *not* been called as an apostle (Luke 6:12-16), he had *not* been commissioned in the same way as the apostles to proclaim the kingdom and cast out demons (Luke 9:1-6), he had *not* received further revelation about the parables and Jesus’ impending death as the apostles had (Luke 8:10; 9:22, 44), and he did *not* have all the shared experiences with Jesus as the apostles had.

But he was *not* the enemy. Or in Jesus’ words, he is “not against you.”

And the apostles were not only to recognize that he was *not against* them, but he was also *for* them. They were on the *same* team.¹¹

In a battle, there are only two sides—my enemies and my allies. There is the person *against* me and the person *not against* me, or the person *not for* me and the person *for* me.

Or to put it another way, in a soccer match, there are two teams. The team *against* me are my opponents, and the team *for* me are my teammates.

Now if my teammate gets injured, will I rejoice? Or if my teammate scores a goal, will I rebuke him? I hope not.

If we understand who our true *enemy* is, then we simultaneously recognize who our true *teammates* are. And if we’re all on the same team, then our *teammates’* success is *our* success, and vice versa.

The passage doesn’t explicitly say whether the non-apostle was a disciple of Jesus or not, but especially in light of Jesus attributing his apostles’ *failure* to cast out the demon from the boy in the previous passage as due to their *deficient faith*, it seems that this non-apostle who is *successfully* casting out demons in Jesus’ name is doing so with *genuine faith* (Luke 9:41; cf. Acts 19:13-16).

It’s true that this man was *not* an apostle, but that did *not* mean that he was the enemy. No, our true enemies are not “flesh and blood” but the demonic forces in this world that would blind us from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (Eph. 6:12; 2 Cor. 4:4).

What’s so crazy insidious about *pride* here is that it *deceived* the apostles into getting their *allies* and their *enemies* mixed up. The *non-apostle* was their *ally* and the *demons* were their *enemies*, but somehow they saw the *non-apostle* as their *enemy*, and they were acting like *allies* to the *demons* by trying to *stop* the *non-apostle* from casting them out of tormented people.

As believers in Jesus Christ, *Satan* would want to destroy us, the *world* would want to persecute us, and our *own sinful nature* would want to enslave us. We are *constantly* engaged in a spiritual battle from every side.

¹¹ In the Mark parallel account, Jesus says, “For the one who is not against *us* is for *us*,” which highlights even more the fact that they were all on the same team.

And so, the worst thing we could do is to *mistake* our fellow brothers in arms as the *enemy* and start stabbing them, for “the words of the reckless *pierce like swords*” (Prov. 12:18 NIV).

Not only does that hurt *them*, but that also hurts *us* because, as we *wound* our *fellow* soldiers in battle, it leaves us *more exposed* to the relentless attacks of Satan, the world, and our own sinful nature.

When we confuse who our true enemy is and we start stabbing one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, we do *more damage* than the demon-possessed person. The one who is demon possessed is *himself tormented*, but the one who mistakes his brother as his enemy *himself tortures* members of his *own* family.

When we mistake fellow Christians as the enemy, we become instruments in the hands of *Satan* rather than instruments in the hands of the *Redeemer*.

So what might this confusion of our true enemy look like?

On one level, it might look like “demonizing” other gospel churches because they don’t align with certain things that we value. They might sing different songs, have different political views, govern their church differently, emphasize different values, hold different theological stances on baptism and spiritual gifts, and so forth. And so, we speak condescendingly and harshly about them, we lack grace and patience for them, and we end up thinking in terms of *us* “against” *them*, or *them* “against” *us*.

This kind of thinking is commonly known as *tribalism*. Tribalism is an “us vs. them” mentality, where *we* are always right and *they* are always wrong, and it has *no place* in God’s family that is made up of people from every tribe, nation, people, and language (Rev. 5:9; 7:9).¹²

Of course, we ought to have biblical convictions, but we are also to have a posture of humility, gentleness, and love.¹³ If our brothers and sisters hold fast to the *same* gospel of Jesus Christ, then regardless of whatever differences we may have, we will see them in heaven, and they are forever our family in Christ.

We’re on the *same* team. And so, though we may disagree on even important secondary points, we should never speak poorly of them or ever think in such a way where “they’re not one of us.”

Rather, if they follow Jesus according to the true gospel, then they’re one of us and we should speak well of them, even as we gently and lovingly discuss our differences with a spirit of humility and unity.

Now one *huge* disclaimer here is that the context of this passage is among *disciples* of Jesus. Jesus is *not* talking about those who would *teach* a different “Jesus” or different “gospel.”

The true Jesus in the true gospel is fully God and fully man—the incarnate second person of the one triune God—who lived perfectly without sin, who died in our place to absorb the full wrath of God that we deserved for our sins, and who resurrected three days later, so that all who repent of their sins and believe in him as Lord and Savior will be *forgiven* our sins, *declared* righteous in God’s sight, *adopted* as children of God, *sanctified* throughout this life, and *glorified* in the life to come.

If a different “Jesus” or different “gospel” is taught, then Scripture is very clear that such a person is a false teacher and is *not* on the same team as Jesus (Gal. 1:6-9)—at least *not yet*.

Such a person should be lovingly rebuked, gently corrected, and persistently prayed for, in hopes that they would repent and believe in the true gospel of Jesus Christ and be saved and forever included into the family of God.

So recognize your true enemy.

Second, recognize the expansive nature of God’s kingdom.

¹² G’Joe Joseph, “Find Your Tribe. Avoid Tribalism.,” The Gospel Coalition, May 9, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tribe-without-tribalism>.

¹³ Adam Ramsey, “Leading with an Anti-Tribal Posture in Angry Times,” The Gospel Coalition, August 11, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/anti-tribal-posture>.

[⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”

Three lessons to address the tendency to be exclusive:

1. Recognize your true enemy.
2. Recognize the expansive nature of God’s kingdom.]

For some reason, the apostles seemed to take *personal offense* that this non-apostle was casting out demons in Jesus’ name. In the minds of the apostles, casting out demons was *their* exclusive ministry (Luke 9:1-6). And for anyone else to have the audacity to minister in that way in Jesus’ name felt like it was *stealing* their ministry from them.

Essentially, this was a wrong *small-minded* view of God’s kingdom.

When Jesus gave his apostles power and authority to proclaim the kingdom of God and cast out demons and heal the sick, did that *steal* ministry from him? No, it *multiplied* it by 12.

And so, when the non-apostle was now casting out demons, should they have seen it as him *stealing* ministry from them? No, it was *multiplying* Jesus’ ministry.

The kingdom of God is *not* a fixed pie, where the only way to *gain* is to *steal* from others. No, the kingdom of God is an ever-expansive seed that continues to grow into the largest of trees, so that all the birds of the air can make their nests in it (Matt. 13:31-32). In other words, there is always more room for others in God’s kingdom.

Jesus does *not* say, “The harvest is in *short supply*, but the laborers are *too many*; therefore, *protect* your portion of the harvest from other laborers who might *steal* from you.” Rather, he says, “The harvest is *plentiful*, but the laborers are *few*; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to *send out* laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37-38).

Is our church reaching *every* lost person and discipling *every* believer in this city? No! Rather, there is much more room for gospel workers in this great harvest of Jakarta / Tangerang. So we ought to *pray for* and *encourage* other churches in our city who faithfully labor alongside us, and we ought to pray for God to send *more* workers and plant *more* churches in our city.

And if *other* churches are reaching *more* lost people and discipling *more* believers than our church is, should we feel insecure or get upset? No! Rather, we should *rejoice* that the gospel is being proclaimed, believed, and lived out by *more* people, and we should be encouraged and inspired by fellow churches to continue to press on in faithful gospel ministry.

Or on a smaller scale, when your LIFE Group feels *stagnant*, can you still *rejoice* when other LIFE Groups are sharing the gospel with others, they’re discipling one another, and many are getting baptized? Or do you somehow feel insecure and threatened by that?

Or on an individual level, when another sister wants to intentionally invest in discipling someone that you’re *already* trying to disciple, can you *rejoice* because now they have *multiple* godly influences in their lives? Or do you somehow feel like they’re *stealing* away your disciple as if you have *exclusive* rights to disciple this person?

It’s so easy to get *petty* in our *small-minded* view of God’s kingdom. But if we understand that there is always room for *more* in God’s kingdom—and in fact, we are to pray for *more* laborers—then we won’t feel threatened as if *our* piece of the pie is being eaten up by someone else, or as if someone is *ransacking* our little part of God’s kingdom. Rather, we will *rejoice* with them in their successes, *lament* with them in their failures, *encourage* them in their faithful ministry, and *pray* for them to continue to grow and multiply in healthy ways.

So recognize the expansive nature of God’s kingdom.

Third, fix your eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ.

[⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”

Three lessons to address the tendency to be exclusive:

1. Recognize your true enemy.
2. Recognize the expansive nature of God’s kingdom.
3. Fix your eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ.]

I know this is a repeat from the first part, but the whole reason that the apostles *confused* who their true enemy was and the whole reason they became so *small-minded* in their view of God’s kingdom is because they had lost sight of the greatest, Jesus Christ.

They had forgotten that they were on “Team *Jesus*” and they started thinking that they were on “Team *Me*” or “Team *Apostles*.”

And so, when they were on “Team *Me*,” the other apostles became their enemies. And when they were on “Team *Apostles*,” the non-apostolic disciple became their enemy.

Likewise, when the apostles were on “Team *Me*,” it was about the greatness of their *own* kingdom over and against the other individual apostles’ kingdoms. And when they were on “Team *Apostles*,” it was about the greatness of the apostle’s *portion* of God’s kingdom over and against anyone else’s *portion* of God’s kingdom.

But for all of us who recognize that we are on “Team *Jesus*,” we see that the *greatest*, Jesus Christ, *humbled* himself to the point of death on a cross to defeat our *greatest* enemies of sin, death, and Satan. And so, we don’t confuse who our true enemy is, but we join our Lord and Savior in killing sin (Gal. 5:24), taunting death (1 Cor. 15:55), and resisting Satan (James 4:7).

And when we fix our eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ, we see that his kingdom *expands* throughout all heaven and earth, and that he came to save those from every tribe, nation, people, and language. So we don’t get petty in trying to protect our small portion of the harvest, but we love, support, encourage, pray for, and rejoice with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ throughout our city and around the world, for there is always more room for more co-laborers in this plentiful harvest.

As we close, we need to ask ourselves if our sense of privilege has turned into a sense of pride. Are we exalting ourselves over others? Are we being exclusive to protect our own sense of greatness?

If we’re honest with ourselves, the truth is that we all do this. We hate it when we see it in others, and we need to learn to despise it when we see it in ourselves. And rather than despairing in or dismissing our pride, let’s learn to fix our eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ, and in him find all the motivation and empowerment we need to exalt *him* and not ourselves, and to support *all* our brothers and sisters to follow him rather than being exclusive.

Here’s the...

Life Application

It’s just a review of the practical lessons we’ve talked about throughout.

1. Address the tendency to exalt ourselves: [in three ways]
 - a. Receive the lowly.
 - b. Recognize that you are lowly.
 - c. Fix your eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ.
2. Address the tendency to be exclusive: [in three ways]
 - a. Recognize your true enemy.
 - b. Recognize the expansive nature of God’s kingdom.
 - c. Fix your eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ.

The One Thing

***Beware of privilege turning into pride,
but fix your eyes on the greatest, Jesus Christ.***

Conclusion

If you're able, can we all stand as we respond to God's Word together?