***LIFE OF SERVICE* IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

February 8, 2015

Luke 9:46-62

Key verse 9:62 “Jesus replied, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

In the passage we looked at last week, we saw Jesus heal a boy with an evil spirit, demonstrating both the compassion and power of God. Before this victory, though, we also saw the powerlessness of the disciples to help him. When Jesus came down from the mountain after the transfiguration, he found that the disciples had tried and failed to cast out the demon, and Jesus perceives the tie between faithlessness and powerlessness, and by healing the demon-possessed son, he leaves the crowd awestruck at the power of God. At the end of the day, though, we are left with two groups of disciples: one group of three who were the VIPs—the ones granted access to go up the mountain and witness Jesus’ transfiguration. We also have the “out-crowd”, though—the disciples who weren’t invited, and ended up failing to cast out demons (even though they had so easily done it before). These feelings of pride and self-pity are really two sides of the same coin, both leading to insecurity and exclusiveness. Just like the disciples, though, we too struggle with everything from pride and exclusivity, to doubt and despair, and even to easy-going apathy. In today’s passage we’ll see Jesus teaching the disciples a new alternative—what life looks like in the kingdom of God practically, and he lays out three *kingdom dynamics*: being humble, inclusive, and *sold-out* to Jesus.

* Greatness is being **humble** (46-48)

Let’s look at verse 46. As we’ll see later on in verse 51, we’re at a point where Jesus is headed to face enormous trials in Jerusalem, and yet the disciples are arguing about who’s gonna be top dog. At first glance it seems odd that after spending so much time with Jesus, they were still feeling insecure about their identity. Wasn’t it enough to be in the intimate circle of Jesus’ friends, hearing his teachings and sharing every meal together?

The reality, though, is that they had each experienced the power of God in Jesus, and had found true hope. In the past, they had settled for living an ordinary life with ordinary goals, but when they followed Jesus they began to have a hope in their heart that they could actually be great, or even the greatest. While aspiring to be great is not a bad thing per se, the disciples still lacked a right paradigm of the kingdom of God, and thought Jesus would establish his kingdom in Jerusalem right away. This view of the messianic kingdom was prevalent at the time, and as Jesus began to reveal more to them about suffering and trials right around the corner, they thought it was only a matter of time before they’d be second-in-command. So it’s not really surprising that this dispute arose at this time—after all, they’ve gotta iron out this hierarchy before the new kingdom is established. As we’ll see throughout today’s passage, the issue is not with their desire for greatness, but rather their misconception of the kingdom of God. We’ll see this running theme of Jesus teaching what serving in the kingdom really looks like, and what kind of people are fit for the job.

When we think of greatness, we think of those at the top of a hierarchy, those with the most power, money, and status. The great ones are those who are recognized for their conquests and achievements. Everyone honours the great as people of importance. The former hockey player, Wayne Gretzky, is called “the Great One.” Even if we can’t be great on a large scale, we still try to be recognized as great in our own little world by trying to be better than others at something. Our longing for greatness in some form or other points to a universal human need for our lives to matter, to have a sense of worth and significance. We want to be honoured and recognized as special and important, and for us this often translates to competing with others and comparing ourselves with others.

Let’s look at verse 48. Jesus redefines greatness and reveals the kingdom of God to be radically different from what his disciples assumed it to be. Jesus wants to teach his disciples that “greatness” in the kingdom of God isn’t about being “head honcho”, or fitting into some hierarchy. Rather it’s about stooping low to show compassion, even though you might not get something out of it. It’s especially interesting that Jesus uses this example. Why is “welcoming a child” such a *great* act? From one point of view, this shows the importance of being a servant, even to the least—an act of service that doesn’t get attention, and for which you don’t get much reward. Jesus made a similar counter-cultural statement in the Sermon on the Mount, where he says it’s the *meek*, and *poor in spirit* who are truly blessed, not the cunning and entrepreneurial.

In another sense, this example of welcoming a child in Jesus’ name represents precisely what God has done for us. Stooping down to reach out to and receive people who have nothing to give, is a clear portrayal of the heart of God—what *greater* act is there than God sending his Son to die for us, who were his enemies? Through this example, Jesus helps his disciples, and us, to understand the true meaning of greatness in the Kingdom.

* Being **inclusive**, and dealing with rejection(verses 49-56)

Let’s look at verse 49. We often see an idealistic portrayal of the disciples as saints who had no sin, as if Jesus specifically chose people that were cooperative and easy to work with. It’s easy to feel like, “Wow, I’m glad God chose these perfect saints to be the foundation of the Church—I would have never been able to do that.” But Luke doesn’t go easy on them. He recounts one mistake after another, instances that really point to their humanity, and we can have the assurance that Jesus worked through people just as broken as we are. We see John in verse 49 trying to stop people from casting out demons in Jesus name, just because they weren’t part of *their* group. They didn’t walk like them and quack like them, so they must have been enemies. On the surface, the disciples were gung-ho for Jesus’ ministry, but Jesus saw through this, and responds to their exclusive mentality in verse 50. “Do not stop him,” Jesus said, “for whoever is not against you is for you.” Instead of feeling threatened by God using others for his work, we should be encouraged knowing they are for us, not against us. The disciples were taken aback by the notion that they weren’t the only ones performing miracles in Jesus’ name, but Jesus was able to use the situation to expand their view of God’s kingdom. I’m not at the center of the Kingdom of God—God is, and God is at work through many people, so there is no place for an us vs. them mentality.

Let’s look at *verse 51*. Knowing that he would face persecution, and ultimately death, in Jerusalem, Jesus knew the ultimate showdown was about to take place. At this point in time, even those around him could sense this resolution. When Jesus stopped in a Samaritan village, the people didn’t accept him. As disciples of Jesus, it must have been hard to get the cold shoulder, and see their unbelief. After all, weren’t the disciples stepping out in faith, breaking cultural barriers to reach out to the Samaritans? When we face this kind of rejection, it’s easy to take it personally, and respond by shutting people out. We see John’s reaction in verse 54. Before, it was like, “anybody who’s not on our team needs to be stopped”, and now he’s literally asking Jesus if he should call down fire and nuke the city! John’s resorting to rage in response to rejection, and once again we see the temptation to exclude. Ironically, later on, we see the Samaritans actually end up responding to the word with close attention, and experience great revival. In Acts ch. 8 it Luke describes the word of God in Samaria:

(4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city. Acts 8:4-8).

If John had had his way, acting in this prideful, exclusive spirit, he would have never seen the great work God was going to do among the Samaritans.

* Living **sold-out** to Jesus

Let’s look at verses 57-58. Here we see a man who seems genuinely interested in following Jesus. And yet, Jesus’ response sounds kind of harsh and discouraging. Why would he answer the man in such a way if he sounds willing to follow? Let’s look at verse 58. So why would Jesus mention foxes and birds? Both foxes and birds have their own homes they can return to—a place they can feel safe, a place that guarantees safety and comfort (more or less). But when Jesus came to this earth, he wasn’t welcomed, but lived as a stranger. Though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him (John 1:10b). We too are no longer of the world but are citizens of the new heaven and earth. Following Jesus doesn’t ensure comfort—Jesus knew that anyone who would follow him would have to step out in faith, out of their comfort zone. From the very first days of the Church, persecution has been a real thing. Even living in a country where we have religious freedom, we face subtle kinds of pressure and trials in academia, in the media, and even from our friends. Jesus knows the heart of the man in verse 57, and tells him the reality of following Christ—that it requires sacrifice. When we follow Jesus, it means stepping out in faith, outside our comfort zone.

Let’s look at verses 59-60. The man’s request seems like a valid one. The implication here is probably that the man’s father is still alive, but the man feels duty-bound to support his father while he’s still alive. Jesus responds very frankly, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” It seems kind of harsh, right? But Jesus is not diminishing the importance of family, but instead calling the man to something higher. How can Jesus be so demanding of our full commitment to him and the kingdom of God? It is because he is the Christ, Lord and King. He is worthy to receive the one life we have to be lived in him and for him. To follow Jesus is to set aside everything else that hinders and go after him today.

Personally, I often feel like I’m waiting for some magical day to come when I’m free of obligations, and *then* I’ll follow Jesus wherever he leads. In high school I thought to myself, “once I get to university, I’ll get involved in a ministry and share my faith etc.” Now that I’m in a university, I think, “once I get more training, I can get a PhD and go do research overseas. *Then* I’ll get involved in missions and share the gospel.” For now, I have to focus on studying and hanging out with friends, spending time with family.... Through this passage I’m learning that Jesus is calling me out, right now, to go and proclaim the kingdom of God. There’s no such thing as the magical day where I’ll be totally free from obligations, and there’s no reason my current responsibilities should hold me back from following Christ.

Let’s look at verses 61-62. We finda similar kind of excuse here. Surely it’s important to say goodbye to your family. After all, we know God values family, so why would it be wrong to see our loved ones? The point Jesus is making, though, is not that we should literally abandon our family—far from it! In Christ, marriages and households are drawn together and relationships restored. Instead Jesus is pointing out the importance of our priorities. It’s true that things like family, studies, and work are important, but these must never eclipse our true calling: to follow after Jesus wholeheartedly as we proclaim the kingdom of God.

Let’s read the key verse one more time (Luke 9:62). The kingdom of God is often kind of a vague concept. We know that in one sense, it refers to what the world will be like after Jesus comes again to establish his eternal kingdom. But we can’t forget that though the kingdom of God is not yet, it has also already come. As we follow Christ, serving others, and preaching the gospel, we’re actually living the kingdom of God, under the reign of God. He works through us to make his kingdom a reality in our world: at school, in the workplace and at home. We also see in verse 62 that serving in the kingdom of God means not looking back. Even when God calls us to something wonderful, and gives us a new identity as his son or daughter, we’re tempted to look back—to think about what we’re missing out on, or the pleasure of living in our old ways. On the other hand it’s also tempting to look back by dwelling on the past, not letting go of the mistakes we made, or the hurt we suffered, failing to forgive those who have wronged us. The reality, though is that in Christ there is freedom, and we are no longer bound by the past. When we proclaim the kingdom of God to our friends, classmates or family members, we need to do so with perseverance, without looking back.

My prayer for all of us is that we would respond to God’s love with a passion to make his name known. Let’s not just talk the talk, but actually live in a way that puts Jesus in first place, that we would proclaim the kingdom of God without looking back.

Let’s pray.