

Crossing out the Letter “I”

Luke 9:46-50

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for March 27, 2022

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The twelve disciples were given intimacy and closeness to Jesus that no other Christians in history have experienced. We might expect that being in the physical presence of Jesus and hearing His teaching from His own mouth would have transformed these men into “super-Christians.” But they suffered from the same struggle with selfishness that is common today. Jesus will confront their self-centeredness with the example of a child.

Hall of Fame basketball coach Pat Riley popularized the term “the disease of more.”

He made the comment that most championship professional teams—whether in football, baseball, basketball, or hockey—rarely repeat as champions, and the main factor is that the team is defeated from within, not from without.

That's because, he said, the players want more. At first, “more” was simply winning the championship. But once players won the championship, it was no longer enough. “More” became other things: more money, more television commercials, more endorsements, more accolades, more playing time, more media attention.

As a result, what was once a cohesive group of hardworking individuals begins

to fray as egos get involved. Players feel entitled; team chemistry becomes a toxic mess; and the most talented teams end up failing.

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/July/pro-basketball-coach-exposes-disease-of-more.html>

If you had the chance to join up with the 12 disciples in Luke chapter 9, they have only recently finished what you could call a championship year.

By the time you arrive at this point, here is their championship resume:

- Three disciples have seen the transfiguration of Christ in brilliant splendor.
- Their leader has demonstrated miracle after miracle.

- The crowds following them were growing enormous, and everyone is wanting to meet them and get close to them.
- The Lord has enabled them to perform their own miracles and move many to repentance through their preaching.
- The Lord's promise of being honored in the coming kingdom has become well known.

These guys had become superstars. They were the chosen ones. The close ones. The Lord's VIPs. The original 12.

And it was going straight to their head. As far as they were concerned, they deserved to be on the Lord's championship roster year after year.

But pride was beginning to surface, like those weeds that stay hidden during the winter.

We have every reason to be grateful that the Lord reveals to us now their blatant sin and failure along the way. The Spirit of God makes no attempt to perfume the record of even His closest disciples.

There are no halos here. And I'm grateful especially, because this means there's hope for you and me; because what they're about to say can sound a lot like you and me; their failure can look a lot like your failure and mine.

You see, Luke is about to show us what it looks like when life becomes all about us—when the letter “I” becomes the center of our lives.

And it should be no surprise that the middle letter in pride is the letter “I”.

We're now in Luke chapter 9 and two events are sandwiched together by Dr. Luke; these two events reveal the same sin of pride.

Let's look at the first event here in verse 46:

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

Luke 9:46

The word ***argument*** could be rendered “debate, or reason together.”

They had been openly debating with each other on who among them deserved the most attention.

They're giving their reasons—their arguments—on why they believed they deserved superstar status. And it was getting heated.

This word for ***argument*** indicates a rather animated conversation.

And they certainly had their reasons to argue their individual preeminence:

Andrew could have argued that he was the one who brought more people to Jesus than the others.

James and John could have argued that they were cousins of Jesus (their mothers were sisters), and they knew Jesus longer than anyone else.

Judas could have argued that he was in charge of the finances, so obviously he was being groomed for the top management position.



Why do you think it mattered to these disciples which one of them was the greatest? How do we compare ourselves to other Christians and try to elevate our own status even in the church body?

Peter could have argued that he had walked on water; it didn't last very long before he got wet, but still, he was the only disciple willing to get out of the boat.

And on and on they went.

Matthew's Gospel account says that they eventually brought this debate to Jesus and asked Him to settle it for them (**Matthew 18:1**).

I mean, they are getting ready for the coming kingdom and they're pretty sure it's time for Jesus to let them know who's on the starting lineup.

But it's actually more than that. The Bible says:

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

Luke 9:46

Would you notice, they are not wanting to know who among them will be *great*, but who among them is the *greatest*.

It isn't enough to be one of the twelve; it isn't enough to just be great; they wanted more, they wanted to be the greatest.

The more you think about their question, the uglier it gets.

They're not debating who among them is great because they have already reached the conclusion that they all are.

"We're all going to be great in the coming kingdom, the question is: who among us will be the greatest of the great?"

R.C.H. Lenski, [The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel](#) (Wartburg Press, 1946), p. 544

Who is number one? Who gets to say, "Mi numero uno."

No matter what language you have or where you live in the world, it's possible to say, "I am number one!"

And the disciples come to Jesus because they want Him to allow one of them to say it out loud in the kingdom.

"In your expert estimation, Lord, rank us from the least to the greatest."

Douglas Sean O'Donnell, [Matthew](#) (Crossway, 2013), p. 500

One commentator, Bruce Barton, made the interesting observation that they are either ignoring the Lord's promise of His coming death, or they're taking His promise to heart and wondering who will be in charge after He dies.

Bruce B. Barton, [Life Application Bible Commentary: Luke](#) (Tyndale, 1997), p. 256

Who's going to take over? We're *all* great, but the lead role should go to the greatest among us; who might that be?

I recently read the account of a psychologist in Michigan who worked with institutionalized people, suffering from total and complete delusions of grandeur.

He eventually published a book on his experiences. He had three patients who believed they were the Messiah—they were totally convinced. He couldn't seem to break through to any of them, to help them accept the truth of their identity.

But then he came up with the idea to bring these three men together for a sort of Messianic-group-therapy-session. He hoped that by meeting each other, he might be able to put a dent in their delusion. But it didn't exactly happen.

He got them seated and then asked one of them, "Why don't you tell us who you are?" The man answered with total confidence, "I am the Messiah, the Son of God. And I was sent here to save the earth." The other two men just looked at him.

The doctor asked him, "Well, how do you know that?" And he responded, "God told me."

One of the other men spoke up and said, "I never told you any such thing."

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2007/may/2050707.html>

Let me tell you, the disciples here don't think they're Jesus, but they might be wondering who's next in line.

Either way, they happen to be deeply polluted right now with self-importance and self-promotion.

To openly debate this question and then ask Jesus to weigh in doesn't mean they are out of their minds, but it does mean they are out of bounds.

Beloved, this is what disciples can look like and sound like and act like when life becomes all about the letter "I", when life is all about you or me.

I find it incredibly encouraging here that Jesus doesn't clobber them or dismiss them and start over.

This is encouraging here because it tells us that the Lord is willing to work with flawed, sinful, proud individuals and continue to teach them and mold them.

Adapted from Powell, p. 235

He will continue working with people who make the same mistakes we make; people who get caught up in their own reflection; people who are just as flawed and foolish as these 12 superstars.



The Gospels give a very raw perspective of the disciples, highlighting both their victories and defeats. How does that encourage us today, who are called by God to minister but often fall short ourselves?

Look at them here: they have become argumentative, competitive, self-seeking, ambitious, self-righteous, and yet the Lord doesn't get rid of them.

Yes, He will rebuke them and chasten them over time, but He will not abandon them.

And He's about to teach them that if you want to be somebody, you need to be nobody; it's when you recognize you are nothing that He will make you into something.

Something for His glory, and not your own.

Now with that in mind, notice here that Jesus doesn't even respond to their question. It's like He didn't even hear them ask Him to rank 1-12.

He just reaches for the nearest visual aid and sets him in the middle of them.

Now notice verse 47:

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

Luke 9:47-48

He doesn't chastise them for wanting to be great; He just *redefines* greatness.

"Let me tell you what it's like to be a great disciple!"

Here's a little child; the Greek word is *paidion*, think kindergartener.

"Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me."

Now Jesus isn't saying that if you're nice to children you get into Heaven.

R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume One (Crossway Book, 1998), p. 366

Nor is Jesus saying, "Act like this child if you want to be great in the coming kingdom."

Jesus isn't asking His disciples in this passage to imitate children.

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the Greek New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 404

He's saying, "How you act toward this child will reveal whether you understand the meaning of true greatness."

We need to travel back to the first century to understand the fact that children were virtually ignored by culture.

The Talmud—the central text of Rabbinic Judaism collected years before the birth of Christ—was their guideline for living. It recorded that keeping company with children added nothing to a person's life; that spending time with children was essentially a waste of time.

Adapted from Hughes, p. 364

Jesus is going to turn that upside down later on in Luke chapter 18 after the disciples try to shoo the children away from Jesus.

And that's because greatness to them was defined by the company you kept; great people associated with great people; significant people received significant people into their homes.

Ibid, p. 365

Peter, James, and John no doubt thought they would be first in line because they associated closely with Jesus; they had even associated on the Mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah.

Ibid

What more could you possibly need to be considered great, having associated with that kind of greatness?

But Jesus here effectively says, "No, if you receive a child—someone small, weak, dependent, no status, no power, no portfolio, no contributions of significance...

Adapted from Garland, p. 404

"You receive a child and you're on your way to demonstrating the kind of attitude you see in Me and My Father."

Now the word here for **receive**, or welcome, points to Near Eastern hospitality. It means to care for their needs; to be kind to them; to look out for them; to welcome them into your life.

And that's what you naturally do with important people, powerful people; you want to talk to them, have lunch with them, add them to your speed dial; they will add something to your sense of self-importance.

But not a child.

The Rabbis of Jesus' day were teaching that those who spent time "tarrying in places where common people assembled or spent time talking to children would only ruin their lives."

Hughes, p. 365

Why? Because a kindergartner occupied no place of prestige or honor. They can't honor you or advance your career; they're only in the way.

Adapted from William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 127

Jesus says here, "You receive a child **in my name**—that is, if you serve them on my behalf for my name's sake and for my glory, even when they can give you none of earth's glory—that happens to be the definition of true greatness.



How does this passage connect to Jesus' later teaching that those who are greatest in the kingdom of God must become the least? How does this radical perspective flip our view of status here on earth?

The way up is down. All the way down to one knee, as it were, to talk to and play with and serve a child.

By the way, this isn't just something to model as you resist the world's definition of greatness; let me encourage you to demonstrate it as parents.

It starts early, quietly, at their six months checkup where you're told if your baby is behind the average standard for weight and height or maybe ahead of the standard.

And the pressure only grows from there: for parents to make sure their children measure up, or even better, excel compared to other children.

In his book entitled, *The All-American Race to Make Champions of our Children*, author Tom Farrey chronicles this American race of parents to push their children into becoming great.

He writes.

- Eleven-year-olds are turning pro at skateboarding;
- Eight-year-olds play 75 baseball games a year;
- Five-year-olds play soccer year-round;
- Six-year-olds have personal trainers and 9-year-olds have professional coaches;
- Four-year-old tumblers compete for the Junior Olympics;
- Three-year-olds are in their third year of swim lessons;
- Two-year-olds have golf clubs custom made.

He writes further; "To get a sense for where all this is heading, I went through a process that took me to Australia; I had with me a cheek swab from my 1-year-

old son, and I was going through the process of getting his DNA tested. A company in Australia used genetic analysis to recommend specific sports where he might excel. Guess what? My 1-year-old evidently had the right stuff for a Winter Olympic sport." He could be great.

Maybe you're thinking, how crazy can it get.

Well, do you get internally worried if your 4th grade child isn't reading at the 7th grade level like your neighbor's child?

Do you call the coach if your child doesn't get as much playing time on the field as you think they deserve?

Do you push your child to make a traveling team and then get upset if they don't?

Do you complain when your child doesn't get a leading role in the school play or doesn't make the cheerleading squad?

Do you call the principal because your child didn't get the teacher you wanted?

Do you call the teacher when your child gets a B on a project instead of an A?

Do you have conversations with your children that informs them they are better than others?

That's pushing them—shaping them after the world's definition of greatness: how smart they are, how athletic they are, how popular they are, how talented they are.

How far ahead of all the other children they are. “Look, my child is the greatest.”

Jesus is redefining greatness, it’s reserved for those who are the least—the *last* in line, not first.



How are you setting the example to your children that helps them understand this redefinition of greatness?

Let’s show our children what greatness looks like. It looks like common ordinary people who live their lives according to the name of the Lord and for his glory and fame and honor.

Now with that, Luke moves us to the second event where the pride of the disciples is revealed again.

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

Luke 9:49-50

If you recall earlier, nine of them had been unable to cast out one demon. Jesus had to handle that encounter by Himself.

But now, here’s a man successfully casting out demons, and the disciples try to stop him, why? He wasn’t one of them.

Mark’s Gospel indicates he was a believer.

He was doing the Lord’s work; He was doing it for the glory and name of the Lord; he was succeeding in delivering the oppressed; he was evidently doing it with the Lord’s delegated power.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights from Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 247

If you can imagine it, he hadn’t been sanctioned by the club; he hadn’t gotten an official permit from the office of the 12 disciples.

Adapted from Powell, p. 236

He was outside their little circle; as one commentator wrote, he wasn’t wearing their uniform, so why would God let him join in the battle.

But evidently, he was more successful than they were, because they had recently failed.

The disciples are jealous, pure and simple.

They want to shut him down because he’s showing them up.

The disciples viewed him as a competitor, and he was making them look bad.

They could use all the spiritual language they wanted: *he’s not been around the Lord like we have; he’s not been vetted like we have been; he wasn’t chosen to be in the inner circle like we were.*

Surely, he can't be used by God! But he was.

Warren Wiersbe writes on this passage, "Believers who think that their group is the only group that God blesses and uses are in for a shock when they get to Heaven."

Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13* (Victor Books, 1989), p. 107

Here's the context. The disciples are in a race to be the greatest and a man that doesn't even follow them is evidently doing a better job than they are!

Here's the point: *he was making them look less than great!*

We must stop him because he's out in front.

How do you respond when you come in second, or third, or last? What happens when you're not the best at what you do?

I got a little test on this just this past week. Evidently the Lord knew I'd be studying this text and decided to put it to me.

I got an email a couple of days ago from one of our pastors who gave me this report; he said that a visitor came to our service last Sunday for the first time. After the service he was asked what he thought, and he said, "The music was

really good." He was then asked about the message, and he said, "I've heard better preaching." He was asked, "Really? Where?" He said, "I watch this guy on TV—Joel Osteen—now *he's* a good preacher."

That didn't bother me at all.

Someone has said that the cross is nothing but the letter "I" crossed out; the cross that we are to carry is the letter "I" crossed out.

Ivor Powell, *Luke's Thrilling Gospel* (Kregel, 1965), p. 239

That goes against the world's definition of greatness.

True greatness is graciousness.

How do we treating people who don't add anything to our resume?

How do we treat people who are ahead of us in line?

How do we treat people who don't belong to our inner circle?

How do we feel when God seems to favor someone else?

These are the moments, and maybe today we need that moment of rededication to the cross; that moment where in our hearts, the letter "I", once again, is crossed out.

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