



As we look at Jesus’ mission in this series, and how he lives into it and what it means for us, today we’re going to see another central value and way he lives into his vision that is the opposite of the ways of the world. **We live in a world that is fairly consumed with status and labels.** Titles, degrees, offices, positions, rank, political party, climbing the corporate ladder, power that comes with status...all these kinds of things tend to motivate and interest us. Take airlines. You can join their mileage program and be a sky miles member. But then there’s levels within that: bronze sky miles member, silver members, gold, platinum, diamond, double platinum, double diamond, elite double platinum...and on it goes. And we know exactly what level everyone is, because we board the plane according to our status. Now they’ve even got special lounge areas at some airports where, if you fly with the right airline at the right airport and if you’ve got enough status, they’ll let you in. Those lounges are amazing with posh amenities and great food. Or at least, that’s what I’ve heard. My airline status is still stuck in the “aluminum” sky miles level 😂. Jesus teaches on this exact topic of status and labels in today’s passage. Let’s read **Luke 9:46-48.**

**Which of them would be the greatest?** The root word for “greatest” is the Greek word “megas”. I remember as a middle schooler in the 1980’s, using this word (not that we knew Greek) to mean that something is excessively, whatever attribute it was we were ascribing to something. So, your shirt could be “mega cool” or the sun could be “mega bright” or even just use it on its own: that new album by George Strait is “mega.” Not that I ever said that one, of course. So, the disciples are having this comparative argument about which of them is simply going to be mega – the greatest. **This is the mindset that “status” can develop: who’s better, or who’s “in,” and ultimately it divides.**

And so, Jesus pulls a kid into the inner circle of the disciples and says to them, “Listen up, you dufusses.” Ok, he didn’t say that, but I bet he thought it... “Listen: If you welcome this little kid, and other kids like him, like you’d welcome me, then you’re welcoming the one who sent me. Being

“mega” in my kingdom doesn’t mean diddlysquat. Rather, the one who humbles himself and sacrifices his position and power is the greatest in the Kingdom of God.” That’s the “Brian North Paraphrase,” and it’s the essence of what he’s saying.

The disciples would’ve been stunned. This was not their culture. For instance, in a collection of Jewish rabbi teachings called the Mishnah, which was widely used in Jesus’ day, one line reads, **“Morning sleep, mid-day wine, chattering with children and tarrying in places where men of common people assemble, destroy a man [person]”** (Jewish Rabbinic saying, *Mishnah: Ethics of the Fathers 3:10*). In other words: don’t do these things, including *talk with children*, or it’ll be your ruin. Jesus was crushing barriers here by pulling a child in and encouraging his disciples to get on the kid’s level.

The principle of what he’s teaching them is that: all people are created in God’s image, have value, and are due respect. All people have worth and value regardless of their physical size – a tiny human matters as much as a full grown one because all are created in God’s image. As one commentary puts it, **“Disciples are to affirm the greatness of all persons; they all have dignity, even those who need to get right with God and deal honestly with sin. Every sinner deserves some respect.”** (IVP New Testament Commentary: Luke). And when a person *does* have status and influence (like Jesus does; status/influence isn’t the issue), the mentality we are to have is not “look how great I am” but to serve others, and to lead them to Jesus; it’s to bring unity, not division. Let’s continue reading now, **verses 49-50.**

This continues the same theme. **The Disciples try to stop a guy from doing ministry in Jesus’ name, because this guy wasn’t with the 12. He’s not part of the “in club.”** Ironically, earlier in verse 40, there was an evil spirit in someone the disciples couldn’t drive out. So, they’re trying to exclude this guy who’s having success, because the 12 are the ones with the status (jealousy?). And Jesus says: No. Again, he is challenging their divisive assumptions about people based on position or status. Let’s finish out with **verses 51-56.**

One of my favorite music groups has a song called, “React, Respond.” And essentially, the message of the song is “Don’t *react* to others out of emotion; instead, *respond* thoughtfully, with respect toward others, and with your brain engaged.” That’s the problem here: **The disciples react from emotion and their sense of superior status as Israelites,** (Samaritans were sort of “half-Jewish” **and dehumanize the Samaritans, rather than responding to them thoughtfully as human beings.** Now, the background here is that Samaritans and Jews didn’t really get along, and hadn’t for centuries. They were at odds with one another, and Jesus breaks down those barriers on more than one occasion.

But James and John react out of emotion, wanting to “call down fire” on the people. And: **What’s Jesus’ response to the disciples’ desire to torch the Samaritans? He rebukes them.** Their *reaction* is not how you are to treat others, even if they treat you poorly. You don’t just assume the worst, label them, and demonize them, because that’s divisive. It’s not the way of Jesus. Neither their historical tensions nor their recent experiences are an excuse to react that way.

These three events are incredibly instructive for us in an age of division. People are labeling and categorizing others without actually knowing them or listening to them. We assume the worst of others. We take a 20-second soundbite and make sweeping reactive moral judgments. We fail to see the humanity in those with whom we disagree. We’re not welcoming others like a child — and everything Jesus teaches here gets discarded.

I saw a video this week where the speaker said, **“If you accept every negative thing about a person and reject every positive, you will neither know your enemy nor make him your friend.”** That’s exactly the disciples’ problem here in all three of these episodes. And it’s not random — they were taught to react this way. It was part of their culture. But Jesus is reshaping them/reorienting them to see people differently — even those with whom they have deep, long-standing disagreements. He’s teaching them not to see others through the divisive lens of status and labels as enemies or lesser humans, but to give them dignity and respect as fellow image-bearers of God.

And we need that same reorientation today. Because, as you know (unless you live under a rock) our country is really struggling with this. **It doesn't help that we've pushed Jesus out of the public square, but even Christians are falling into these same patterns.** Our thinking about, and treatment of, other people is being shaped, "disciplined" we could say, by voices that cause division.

We watch a few short video clips, form snap judgments, and label someone "the worst person ever." We consume media that reinforces those judgments and tells us, "Our side would never do that," while assuming everyone on the other side is the worst version of everything we dislike and disagree with. And then — just like the disciples — we "call down fire" on them. We fail to see that our own side often uses the same tactics, or that the people we're demonizing are humans. We judge others by one set of rules and ourselves by another. This "secular discipling" that's happening to us runs completely counter to what Jesus teaches here and throughout his ministry.

When we respond that way, we're dehumanizing people who are also made in the image of God. We reduce them to a faceless "they," assuming the worst and never actually listening. It's tearing our nation apart — and it's creeping into the American church (more than "creeping" really). Now, we can't control how nonbelievers treat people. If they want to "call down fire," reject others, or respond with judgment and slander, well...that actually shouldn't surprise us.

What *is* surprising – and heartbreaking – is when Christians do the same. **It is evidence that we're being disciplined by something or somebody other than Jesus.** We're finding our identity (talked about a few weeks ago) in these other things, rather than in Jesus. In these three events we read this morning, Jesus invites His disciples to sacrifice a divisive attitude that says, "Because of our status, we're greater than you. I'm greater than you. I'm more important than you (46-48)...I'm on the inside, and you're not (49-50)...you're offensive because of what you said or how you treated me, so I'll assume the worst and write you off" (51-56).

**Instead, Jesus calls us to something radically different: to stoop down to welcome those with less; to treat as human people who aren't in our "circle"; and to resist reacting out of emotion that divides, dehumanizes, and destroys.** He calls us to treat every person with dignity and respect — because they, too, are made in the image of God.

So, how shall we then live? Jesus shows us in these verses. Look at verse 51: **“As the time approached for Jesus to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51).** That's a verse worth underlining. It marks a turning point in Luke's Gospel. Jesus leaves his ministry in Galilee and begins the journey south – through Samaria, toward Judea and Jerusalem – on his way to the cross.

And notice the word “resolutely.” Luke uses the Greek word *esterisen*, which means “to fix firmly” or “to set with determination.” Jesus is not wandering aimlessly; he is deliberately, purposefully setting his face toward the cross, going through Samaria. He could have gone around it, as most Jews did, but instead he went straight through it – intentionally, missionally, sacrificially.

We are called to that same kind of deliberate living when we live on mission for him. Earlier in this same chapter, Jesus tells his disciples, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross (Remember, that's their version of the electric chair, not jewelry) daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23–24).** Jesus challenges us to sacrifice like him – for the sake of his mission. He invites us to take up our own cross, our own instrument of sacrifice. And in today's passage, he calls us to humility – to get on the same level as others, to welcome them, and to recognize them as image-bearers of God. In God's kingdom, status and position don't matter – except for one: acknowledging the status of Jesus. Is he Lord and Savior, or not? That's the only status that matters.

If Jesus is Lord and Savior, then let's live like it. Two things to consider doing to live more like Jesus. **First, make sure Jesus is discipling you, not your news and social media, and so forth.** This might mean cutting that stuff from your life for a while. I know that might be challenging. But you

can replace it with reading your Bible, praying, serving people in need, getting involved in ministry leadership, etc. There are a lot of ways to grow in discipleship to Jesus. When we do that we'll probably find that we start to lose the "us vs. them" mentality, and can lay down our desire for status that fuels pride, control, vengeance, a sense of superiority and the tendency to demonize others.

**Second, if you don't already have this kind of relationship, get to know someone – in person, face to face – who thinks totally different than you.** Jesus intentionally went through Samaria, the people who thought differently than his "tribe" did. We can do the same. Listen to them. Ask questions to understand and clarify rather than thinking about how to come back with your own arguments. That's one way we can love our neighbor, something Jesus rates pretty highly. You know, in the 1980's, Ronald Reagan (a conservative republican President) and Tip O'Neill (the liberal democratic speaker of the house) disagreed with each other vehemently on politics and policy. But they would regularly – weekly, at times – get together to talk policy and see where they could find agreement. And they maintained a friendship. Tip O'Neill was known to say, "We're friends after 6:00 pm." That's how you treat another person with respect and dignity.

**So: Jesus is calling us to sacrifice the attitudes that come from labels and status and only cause division, and instead live so that the light of Jesus would shine and his mission might advance: to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the captives, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and to declare the year of the Lord's favor.** We have good news to share – because of Jesus! This is the mission he invites us into and sends us on. As we saw last week, mercy is a vital part of it. And today, we see the cost – the daily sacrifice of following Jesus. Not only the sacrifice he made on the cross, but the sacrifice he calls us, his disciples, to make – so that others might be led to him, confess their sin along with us, place their faith in him along with us, and know that they too, just like us, are made in the image of God, loved and redeemed by Jesus. Let's pray... Amen.