

The next incident in Luke continues to focus on lessons that the disciples need to learn in preparation for the difficult days which lay ahead. The setting takes place at a house in Capernaum (Mk. 9:33), a city at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee.

The house was most likely Peter and Andrew's, which had served as the headquarters for Jesus and his disciples whenever they were in the area. Luke 9:46-50 was the last incident that Luke recorded of Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

Rivalry over Greatness Dispelled - Luke 9:46-48; Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37

9:46 An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest.

9: 47 And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, 9:48 and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great."

Not many days had passed since the disciples had identified Jesus as the Christ (Lk. 9:20). In Luke 9:27 Jesus had told them that there would be those among them who would not taste death until they saw the kingdom of God come. After that, Peter, James, and John had a preview of Jesus' messianic glory at the transfiguration (Lk. 9:28ff.). The coming kingdom was at the forefront of their thinking, and they were pondering what role they might have in it when it came.

"These men were citizens of a nation and culture which placed great stress on status and rank. We can surmise (with good reason) that these common fishermen were now quite proud of being one of Jesus' chosen disciples. In the world of first century Judaism, they had moved across town to the right side of the tracks (so to speak)" (Riddlebarger).

On their trip en route to Capernaum the disciples began discussing with one another what they thought their status might be in the kingdom, and an argument quickly ensued over which of them was the greatest (Matt. 18:1).

When they arrived at Capernaum and entered the house, Jesus began to question them saying, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent. (Mk. 9:33, 34a).

"You can just picture these men falling silent and then ceasing to make eye contact with each other when Jesus asked them this question. They were embarrassed to tell Jesus what they were arguing about because the question itself revealed how petty the argument had been" (Riddlebarger).

Jesus knew what they had been talking about; Luke 9:47 says He perceived the "thought of their heart" (the word translated *thought* is rendered 'argument' in the previous verse – Morris, 192). His question was really just His transition to instruction.

The disciples still didn't understand that humility and self-denial are fundamental attitudes of those who follow Christ. In Luke 9:23 Jesus had told them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, *he must deny himself*, and take up his cross daily and follow Me." The word "deny" literally means "to disown

something.” Jesus demands that His followers disown themselves. Just as Jesus was going to take up a cross and die, His disciples need to take up their cross and die daily. But the words didn’t sink in. The disciples were ambitious, competitive, self-willed. They were seeking prestige and rank. They did not understand that death to self precedes glory.

Perhaps Jesus allowed some time to pass in silence as they reflected upon their disgraceful behavior, but it is obvious that that they didn’t understand the nature of the kingdom of God. Finally, they asked Jesus, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt. 18:1).

Sitting down, Jesus called the twelve (Mk. 9:35) and a child to Himself (Matt. 18:2); He stood him by His side (Lk. 9:47), wrapped him in His arms (Mk. 9:37) and said to them, ***"Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great"*** (Lk. 9:48; cf. Mk. 9:36, 37). Jesus is not just teaching truth; He is enacting it.

In Aramaic (which Jesus was no doubt speaking), the word for “servant” is the same word used of children (Lane, Mark, 340). Socially, children had few legal rights; they held the lowest position in society. Unlike western societies that extoll the virtues of childhood, high infant mortality rates and the need for labor in the ancient world made children insignificant until they were old enough to contribute to society (Edwards, 290). Infants in the ancient world were often viewed as disposable; they were simply thrown away and left to die by exposure if they were thought to serve no future purpose.

It becomes apparent in reading the three synoptic gospels of this account that none are quoting exactly what Jesus said; rather, they are pulling from Jesus’ instruction those points that struck them or are pertinent to the point they are making.

1) **Luke** gives the most condensed form of Jesus’ instruction. In Luke 9:48 Jesus said, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me."

The saying falls into two parts: The first part states, “whoever receives this child in My name receives Me.” The emphasis is on the disciples’ attitude in the present situation with the child before them.

Jesus was not teaching that the disciples needed to be like children; rather, He was pointing out that receiving the lowly was part and parcel with being His disciple. Jesus didn’t simply say, “whoever receives this child,” He said, “whoever receives this child *in My name*.” R. C. H. Lenski in commenting on what it means to do things in Jesus’ name writes, "It means that absolutely everything... is to be done in the light of the revelation of our Lord and harmonize with that revelation. It ever reveals Jesus as our Savior-Lord to whom we belong absolutely and altogether" (The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles, Colossians - Philemon, 179). In other words, receiving the child in Jesus’ name demonstrates that their behavior was due to their association with Jesus; acknowledgement of the child was an action based on discipleship. As O’Brien says, “The whole life of the Christian stands under the name of Jesus’ . . . In becoming a Christian the believer calls upon Jesus as Lord and comes under the authority of Christ. He belongs wholly to Him; thus everything he says or does ought to be in the light of the fact that Jesus is

his Lord. His behavior should be entirely consistent with Jesus' character" (O'Brien, Colossians, 211, 212). Thus, if Jesus received the insignificant and the "useless" of society, His disciples should too, for they act in His name.

However, instead of affirming the greatness of the disciple who does this, or stating that he is following His example, Jesus said that the one who receives the child as He has, receives Him! Their reception of the child, done in Jesus' name, is received by Jesus as an action done to Him. The same thought is found in Matthew 25:34-46.

Jesus then takes it even further. The second part says, "whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me." Jesus had been sent by the Father, so receiving Him is tantamount to receiving the Father, as well.

2) In **Matthew** 18:3, Jesus said, "unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." In other words, the apostles' love of greatness and status needed to change. If it didn't, they would not even enter the kingdom, let alone, hold a rank in it. Specifically, they needed to become like children. Verse 4 tells them how: "Whoever then *humbles himself as this child*, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Humanity as a whole is dominated by self-love, self-satisfaction, self-promotion, self-exaltation, and self-fulfillment. In our world these are considered virtues. Jesus' teachings turn our world upside down. A disciple of Christ needs to view himself as being no higher in social position than that of a child. Children could not rise in status; they were not recognized as important nor were they respected. They were not in a position to look down on others or demand things of them. They were not striving to gain notoriety or fame. Their station of life prevented them from even thinking in those terms. The one who is great in the kingdom of God must have this same mindset.

This is similar to being poor in spirit (Lk. 6:20; Matt. 5:3). It is the recognition that social status, wealth, and fame are of no value to God.

3) **Mark** 9:35-37 adds a third emphasis: "*If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.*" Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 'Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.'

In this case, Jesus uses the child to teach that true greatness is a matter of humble *service* and low standing. Of course, serving in this way also requires humility (Matt. 18:4) and acceptance (Lk. 9:48), so the nuances of all three passages are closely related.

Thus, the disciples were to go about their work without regard to status; they were to be humble (Matt. 18), accept everyone (Lk. 9), serve everyone (Mk. 9), and not seek anything other than the best interests of the kingdom of God. In doing so, they would be welcoming and serving Christ.

Matthew 18 and Mark 9 end with a warning.

Matthew 18:5-6

*5 "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me,
6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him
to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

Note the following:

1) In Matthew 18:6 Jesus calls these children, "little ones *who believe in Me.*" In other words, the "children" He is speaking of are not literal children, but His true disciples. Whoever receives one of *these* children, receives Jesus and whoever causes one of *these* children to stumble stands in grave peril.

2) Matthew 18:5 and 6 form a grammatical couplet; the phrase, "whoever receives one such child" (18:5) is roughly parallel to "whoever causes one of these little ones . . . to stumble" (18:6. To "receive" someone in Jesus' name means to approve, love, or treat them with kindness on His account because they are His "children." What someone does for them is counted as an act done *for* Christ. The opposite is also true; "the one who causes one of these little ones to stumble" is acting *against* Christ. This is why causing a believer to stumble is such a grave offense; it is an offense against Christ Himself. It would be better for that person to die by having a great millstone fastened around their neck and drowned in the depth of the sea.

"To have a great millstone fastened around one's neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" is a powerful way of expressing the seriousness of the offense. To die a horrible death would be better than causing a child of God to stumble. Punishment by drowning "was not recognized in the Jewish law, but it was in occasional use among the Greeks in cases of special infamy (Diod. Sic. xvi. 35), and had been inflicted by Augustus (Sueton. Aug. lxvii.) . . . Our Lord's words, on this assumption, would come home with a special vividness to the minds of those who heard them. The infamy of offending one of the "little ones" was as great as that of those whose crimes brought upon them this exceptional punishment" (Ellicott). The disciples would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about, since the Romans had recently tied millstones to the necks of some of the leaders of an insurrection and threw them in the sea (Lane, Mark, 346).

Warning against Causing Believers to Stumble - Luke 9:49-50; Matthew 18:6-14; Mark 9:38-50

***9:49 John answered and said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name;
and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us."***

9:50 But Jesus said to him, "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you."

One wonders if Jesus' warning about not causing someone to stumble (Matt. 18:5-6) pricked John's conscience and prompted him to wonder about how they had treated a man they had met. However, Morris comments that because it says that John "answered" it probably means that John was assuming that there were surely some limits to what Jesus said; it would not apply to a case like this (Morris, 193). In either case, verses 49 and 50 could serve as an example about how the disciples should not cause others to stumble. But there is another option as well; this may not be as closely tied to the previous

section as it appears; it could be a new discussion that reveals the disciples' attitude toward *outsiders*, placed here to contrast the previous section that dealt with their attitude toward *insiders*.

The disciples were conscious that they had been personally appointed by Jesus. As part of His inner circle, they had begun to view their position as one of entitlement of privilege and exclusion (Edwards, 292). "The same selfish pride that drove the disciples to seek precedence in their in-group rouses them to ensure that outsiders remain outsiders and unempowered" (Garland, 405). The question in every age is, what constitutes true membership in the community? (Edwards, 292) It reminds us of the incident with Eldad and Medad in Numbers 11:26-29 which says,

26 But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them . . . and they prophesied in the camp.

27 So a young man ran and told Moses and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

28 Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them."

29 But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD'S people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!"

Jesus offers a simple response: "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you." Mark adds, "for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me" (Mk. 9:39). That is, if anyone is working for the cause that Jesus is committed to, he cannot be working against Him at the same time (Lane, Mark, 344). Even if the person had not been personally authorized as an apostle, making Jesus' name known is more important than *who* makes it known (Phil. 1:12-18; Edwards, 292). This will become clearer to the disciples after Jesus' ascension when they are faced with an ever-increasing hostile environment – they will need all the friends they can get (Garland, 405).

"The basic principle that Jesus' kingdom is bigger and more extensive than the disciples presently envision is reinforced when he tells the disciples in [Mark chapter 9] verse 41, "*I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.*" Offering someone a drink of water was a very common and ordinary act of courtesy in first century Palestine" (Riddlebarger). But to offer water to someone *because* they are a disciple of Christ is to also offer it to Christ (cf. Matt. 18:5). That person will not lose reward; that is, their act of kindness to a fellow believer will not go unnoticed.