

Luke 9:37-50

Introduction

If you've watched the TV show, *The Apprentice*, you'll be familiar with the kind of people who put themselves forward to be Lord Sugar's next business partner. Generally speaking, they're supremely confident in their own abilities and they're all convinced that they're precisely the person that Lord Sugar is searching for. But then, inevitably, as they take part in different tasks and challenges, their deficiencies are ruthlessly exposed. And one by one, they are sent home. It can make for painful viewing but that's the whole point of the show.

Well, it's not quite the same with the disciples. They're not putting themselves forward as the next great entrepreneur. They're not being weeded out one by one. And they don't need to fear hearing the words, "You're fired!" coming from Jesus' lips. But nonetheless, they have each been called by Jesus to be partners with him in his ministry. And like the candidates on *The Apprentice*, in our passage today, their failings and deficiencies are being visibly exposed. It makes for painful reading. But in these verses, Luke shows us four areas in which the disciples are deficient. Four areas in which they are lacking. The first of those is faith. The disciples display a lack of faith, or belief. And that's our first heading.

Belief

Please look down with me at verses 37 to 43.

The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. A man in the crowd called out, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.'

'You unbelieving and perverse generation,' Jesus replied, 'how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.'

Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.

Last week we read of the glory of the transfiguration on the top of the mountain. But now Jesus comes back down from the mountain to the brokenness of the world. And immediately, he's confronted with another heart-wrenching situation. This poor man is powerless to stop his son's suffering. Once again, as with Jairus before him, this is his only child. And the man can do nothing but look on as this evil spirit destroys him.

What's more, we're told that, despite the man's pleas, the disciples have been unable to help. And that should, surely, come as a surprise. Not long ago, Jesus had given his disciples power and authority to drive out demons. This is something they had authority to do. It's something they *should* have been able to do. But they had failed. And Jesus highlights the problem in verse 41: **'You unbelieving and perverse generation,'** he says. It's a failure of faith.

What Luke's showing us is that the disciples' faith is inconsistent. You may remember their lack of faith as they crossed the Sea of Galilee and got caught up in a storm, back in chapter 8. The beginning of chapter 9 was more promising. Jesus had sent them on a mission, and they had gone out proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere. But when they returned their faith was not in evidence once again, when they were faced with the challenge of feeding 5,000 hungry men, and probably more if we include women and children. And here, as they're confronted with a powerful display of evil, their faith seems to be completely absent.

'How long shall I stay with you and put up with you?' Jesus asks. He's not being grumpy. He's highlighting *how much* they still need to learn and *how little* time is available. Before long, they will be going out to the world to continue his work. And they are far from ready. The task of training them is urgent and necessary.

So then, Jesus calls for the boy to be brought to him. Even as he comes, the spirit goes on the offensive and throws him into a convulsion. But with a word, Jesus rebukes the evil spirit. The boy is healed instantly. Everything that was wrong is put right. And the boy is restored to his father. It's a wonderful picture of the redemption that Jesus has come to accomplish. And everyone who sees it is amazed at the greatness of God.

Here's the problem. The disciples had doubted God's greatness and his power. They had failed to trust that he could overcome evil. And I find that easy to relate to. Just read the news. The wickedness in the world around us is terrifying. Very often, it seems as though evil is winning. And when I look *within*, at my own heart, it's little different. It's an ugly sight. The pride and selfishness. The greed. Sometimes it seems as though Satan's got the upper hand. Do you ever feel that? Do you ever feel as though Satan's winning?

Yet God is all-powerful. He is more than capable of overcoming evil. And he is wholly committed to doing so. He has proved it at the cross. He can help us in our struggles now. And one day, he will put right all that's wrong, both within and without.

What I realise, as I read this story, is that I'm just like the disciples. My faith is inconsistent. At times it's lacking altogether. And there is still so much for me to learn. How about you?

Well, if the disciples first failure was a lack of belief, their second is a lack of understanding. And that's our next heading.

Understanding

Please look down at verses 43 to 45.

While everyone was marvelling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, ‘Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.’ But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

We can imagine the buzz of excitement in the crowd at this moment. They’ve just seen an amazing display of divine power. And they marvel at Jesus. But Jesus takes the disciples to one side and tells them to listen carefully to what he’s about to say. They need to take his words on board. And then he warns them in advance that the admiration of the crowd isn’t going to last. A time will come when he faces rejection and death. He will be delivered into the hands of men, who will kill him. And the implication is that they should expect to be treated the same. And they don’t get it. They can’t understand how *that* could fit into God’s plan of salvation. And they’re afraid to ask him about it. This isn’t the first time Jesus has told them all this. And perhaps they realise they should have grasped it by now. But they remain silent. They don’t ask. And they fail to take the warning on board.

Again, I can see myself here. The Bible speaks plainly about what it means to follow Jesus. It means living as foreigners and strangers in the world, as exiles whose true home is not *here* but elsewhere. And it means walking a path of radical self-denial. We saw last week that following Jesus means taking up our cross daily and dying to our old sinful way of life, when we lived like those around us. We’re to live in a new way that is radically different to the way others live. Only then will the world see the difference the gospel makes to our lives. But he’s warned us that we’ll face opposition and hostility because of it. We may even face persecution. Yet I am so slow to take that on board. I quite like the way other people live. I want to fit in rather than stand out. And I want to be popular. I want people to like me not think I’m a bit odd. And I certainly don’t want them to hate me because I’m a Christian. But I will achieve nothing of eternal significance if I’m not prepared to be rejected and, if need be, to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

When it comes to understanding how Jesus wants me to live, I need to admit that I’m just as slow-witted as the disciples. I have just as much trouble in understanding the kind of life he’s calling me to live as they did. Every day, I need to ask God what a life of radical self-denial means for me personally. Every day, I need to ask him what it means for me, personally, to live as a foreigner and stranger in this world. And if I’m to live in a way that makes the gospel visible for the world to see, then I need to listen much more carefully to what he tells me in his word, the Bible. How about you?

The disciples didn’t understand what Jesus told them. But a lack of understanding wasn’t their only problem. They were also lacking in humility, which is our next heading.

Humility

Please look down at verses 46 to 48.

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and made him stand beside him. Then he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.'

Jesus is walking a path of humility and rejection. Meanwhile, his disciples are arguing about who's the greatest. It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic. Their lack of humility is breathtaking. So Jesus takes a child and makes him stand beside him. Children had no status in those days. They were treated as unimportant. Yet Jesus makes the child stand beside him, which is a place of honour. And he tells the disciples that they are to treat with honour those like this child, who are the least in society. When they welcome the lowly and unimportant, such as this little child, they welcome him.

His point is that there are no unimportant people in God's eyes. Our categories of greatness are irrelevant to God. We might divide the world up into different types of people. We might think in terms of the great and the lowly, the important and the unimportant. But God doesn't. When the least is also the greatest, as Jesus says, then our ideas of greatness are irrelevant. Everyone is important to God. And that means the competitive rivalry that the disciples are engaging in is wholly out of place.

Once again, can't we see ourselves here? I know I can. I can certainly recognise in myself that desire to be looked up to and regarded highly. I can be just as swollen-headed as the disciples. Can't you? But Jesus corrects that thinking. He hates all that competitive rivalry that wants to be seen to be greater than others. As he speaks to his disciples, he's walking a path of humility and suffering. He's heading to the cross, where he will lay down his life for people of all kinds. And his disciples will be of no use to him if they're continually striving to be a 'Somebody'. Rather, he gives them the task of reaching out to those whom the world regards as 'Nobodies' and welcoming them into his kingdom. And that's the task that you and I have today.

But there's one more failing still to come. And that's our final heading. It's a lack of tolerance.

Tolerance

Please look down again at verse 49.

'Master,' said John, 'we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.'

‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said, ‘for whoever is not against you is for you.’

Here’s the problem: the disciples think they’ve got an exclusive claim on gospel ministry. It’s *their* ministry and no one else has a part to play. It’s a narrow-minded approach to gospel ministry. And they’re going to struggle to take the gospel to the world if they continue to think like that. The task is huge. They’re going to need all the help they can get.

Jesus is rebuking that attitude of distrust and tribalism that we can be prone to in gospel ministry, particularly as evangelicals. Gospel ministry isn’t about building our own little kingdom. It’s about building the kingdom of Christ. And none of us can do that on our own. It takes partnership and cooperation. Of course, we need to be wise. When others abandon the gospel, as some have, any partnership we have will need to come to an end. But when we share the same gospel, we can welcome what others are doing, even when they’re “not one of us”. And we can work together for the growth of Christ’s kingdom.

Conclusion

And that brings this opening section of Luke’s book to a close. The first nine chapters all happen in and around Galilee. But now, the ministry in Galilee has come to an end. A long middle section is about to begin, to which Luke will devote another 10 chapters. In those chapters, he will document the long, slow journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, which will take about a year to complete. We’ll get an introduction to it next week, when James Clarke preaches. And here, in chapter 9, Luke’s shown us why that journey is necessary. He’s shown us how much the disciples still need to learn before they can go into the world and do the work that Jesus will give them to do. The journey to Jerusalem is going to be an extended training course through which he will give them repeated opportunities to learn from him and put what they learn into practice.

And that should encourage us. We are just like the disciples. Our failings and deficiencies are many. We all have a lot still to learn. But the Lord is patient with us. And as we follow him, we discover day by day how committed he is to our renewal. We are all works in progress. Each of our lives is under renovation. But the Lord is patiently equipping us more and more with each passing day for the work that he has given us to do.

Let’s pray.

Loving Father, as we read of the disciples and see their deficiencies being exposed, it’s all too clear that we are just like them. Yet, to our wonder and amazement, you have graciously given us the same task as you gave them, of taking the message of salvation to the world. Thank you for your patience with us, when we fail. Thank you for all the opportunities you give us to learn from you and try again. And thank you for your loving presence with us each day. Please continue to equip us for the gospel ministry you have entrusted to us. And please bear fruit through us for your kingdom. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.