

Target Practice (You Be the Target)

Doug Brendel
Approx. 23 minutes

Luke 9:46-56

- ⁴⁶ An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. ⁴⁷ Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. ⁴⁸ 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.”**
- 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.”**
- ⁵⁰ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said, “for whoever is not against you is for you.”**
- ⁵¹ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then he and his disciples went to another village.**

You know Christine McVie? Vocalist with Fleetwood Mac?
She has a song called “Songbird,” which I really like; and the end of the refrain goes:

And I love you, I love you, I love you like never before.

What she’s really talking about here, I think, is a feeling.
Love is a tricky thing.
It’s easy to think we’re doing it, because of how we feel.
But in fact, love isn’t a feeling.
Romance is a feeling.
Affection is a feeling.
Love is an action.

When Christine McVie sings *I love you, I love you, I love you like never before*, she’s singing about the feeling of affection.

But it's so clumsy to sing *I feel affection for you, I feel affection for you, I feel affection for you like never before.*

Real love isn't just a feeling. It's an action.
And sometimes, to do the action of love is going to *hurt*.
Often, in fact.

My wife and I used to be foster parents.
You care for a child in your own home for several weeks or months or even years, as if the child were your own,
and then generally, at some point, their own home situation gets straightened out, and you the day comes when you have to say good-bye to that child.
It hurts.

An acquaintance learned we were foster parents, and she said to me, "Oh, I could never do that; I love kids too much."
As if we somehow loved kids LESS, and that DEFECT is what qualified us to be foster parents!
I wanted to say, "Lady, it's not that your heart is so big. It's that your heart is so small. You're not willing to love a kid who might hurt you. Get out of my face."
But I didn't.
She was very large, and I wasn't sure I could take her in a fight.

Now don't let me offend you, please.
I appreciate people who say, "The pain of losing a child after a few months or years would just be too much for me."
That's a totally legitimate, truthful statement.
That is honestly a very good reason not to become a foster parent.
I applaud that kind of honesty.
But that's not the same as "I love kids too much."

Love is willing to make certain sacrifices of comfort and pleasure to achieve some larger goal.
We just don't always live love according to its actual definition.

We tend to live on romance, and CALL it love
or affection, and CALL it love
or pleasure, and CALL it love.

Of course, I want to think of myself as a loving person.

An unselfish person.
 A giving person.
 And if I sat you down with a survey and asked you what kind of a person
 you are,
 you'd probably be comfortable saying you're a loving person,
 unselfish, giving.
 You have a good heart.
 You love people.
 Of course!

But the truth is, I demonstrate my LACK of love in dozens of ways every
 single week of my life.
 And furthermore, I do it without even realizing it.
 And my lack of love, my "unlovingness," is sort of like a gun.
 It hits different targets.

If there's a consolation in all this, it's that I'm not the only one.
 And neither are you.
 Human beings have been demonstrating a lack of love almost ever since
 there WERE human beings.
 Even the disciples of Jesus, who spent almost 3 solid years in the closest
 possible contact with him,
 watching him and learning from him firsthand—
 even these guys managed to demonstrate "unlovingness."
 They did it over and over and over.
 And without even realizing it, their lack of love hit different targets.

In Luke 9:46, we find Jesus and his disciples in Capernaum,
 which sits on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.
 This was Jesus's hometown in the same way that Ipswich, Massachusetts,
 is my hometown.
 I didn't grow up in Ipswich; I grew up in the Chicago area.
 Jesus didn't grow up in Capernaum; he grew up in Nazareth.
 But later in life, I made Ipswich my home.
 Because Chicago is Nowheresville, man. Ipswich is a hoppin' town.
 And in perhaps the same way, as an adult, Jesus made Capernaum his
 home.
 because Capernaum was a hoppin' town,
 Nazareth was Nowheresville.
 (Which, by the way, is why the religious authorities called Jesus the
 Nazarene, or specified that he was Jesus "of Nazareth":
 it was a put-down.)

Jesus and his disciples have been ricocheting all over the map, trying to stay out of the clutches of the feds; the authorities have been trying to track Jesus down and trip him up, and Jesus has a lot more work he wants to get done, a lot more teaching he wants to get accomplished, before his time is up.

So he's been avoiding the feds.

But now, he's beginning the final year of his 3-year-long earthly ministry.

He has finished the second year, which biblical scholars often call the "Year of Popularity,"

and he's ready to begin his third and final year, which is known as the "Year of Opposition."

So he more or less comes out of hiding.

He returns to his hometown and, you might say, he "goes public."

If anybody wants to find him, here he is — in Capernaum.

He's at his normal address.

And in **Luke 9:46**, it says,

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.

I look at this account and I think, What babies! What dopes!

Who's going to be the greatest?

I never duked it out with anybody over this kind of nonsense!

Until if I stop and think about it, and I'm honest with myself, I start to see how absolutely "me" this is —

because, for example, let's say I sit in a staff meeting at work, and I have this idea for how to approach a certain challenge in the company,

and under the surface, while I'm expressing my idea,

I'm enjoying the idea that I'll finish talking, and everyone will nod their heads and agree with me,

The boss will grin at me and tell me how wise I am.

But then some so-and-so on the staff expresses *their* idea for how to approach the situation,

and you know, their idea makes as much sense as my idea — but what's my instinct?

I want to win.

My nature is to jump in and sell my idea as superior.

Not because I'm totally convinced it's superior.

Just because I want to be the winner.

When my wife suggests a better way to clean that glass table top, honestly, my natural reaction is NOT “Oh yes, dear, here, please show me, teach me, enlighten me!”

My natural reaction is, “Shut up! I’m already humbling myself here by being your servant and cleaning this stupid glass table top! What more could you WANT?”

What is my heart-response to her?

The true response of my heart is, I’m greater than you. You’re lucky I’m not exercising my true superiority.

I’m just playing the ROLE of the servant.

In actuality, my secret heart tells me I deserve to be the MASTER.

Every time somebody else gets the parking space I thought I had spotted first,

and I hit the steering wheel and say, “Rats!”

(of course that’s the strongest language I would ever use;

I’m the very model of grace and gentleness)

I’m doing exactly what Jesus’s disciples did:

I am, in effect, arguing about who will be the greatest.

Whose needs are the most important to meet?

Mine!

When you do something I disagree with,

and I talk to someone else in the church, or in town, about what you did, in hopes of getting them to share my negative opinion of your actions,

I’m doing what the disciples did:

I’m arguing about who will be the greatest.

I’m expressing a lack of love...

“unlovingness.”

Whose view is the most valid to be embraced?

Mine!

Who will be the greatest in the Kingdom?

Me!

We do it all the time.

Every day.

The disciples weren’t unusually immature.

They were just as immature as we are!

Likewise, I need to understand that **my natural instinct is NOT to love**

people.

I have to be on my guard every single day against my natural inclination to undermine my relationships.

Fortunately, I can ask the Spirit of God to call this to my attention and correct it

day by day, step by step, situation by situation, moment by moment—because this is a condition of my human nature which is not going to go away.

It is something I will need to keep working on every single day of my life, as long as I live.

What's up with this “greatness” impulse I seem to have inside me?

Why should it be a big deal?

Why don't we just go with “survival of the fittest” — I'm greater than you, I win, you lose, case closed?

Well, look at the picture Jesus paints for his disciples.

He shows them a little child — someone whom these grown men were obviously superior to physically, intellectually, financially.

A child is dependent on adults for survival.

This child could be a symbol of anyone I deal with who sees something differently than I do;

there's some function that they think ought to be done one way, and I see that *obviously* it ought to be done another way.

Or maybe there's someone who's emotionally under-developed in some way,

maybe they're struggling with some kind of lifestyle component that the way I see it, they're letting it undermine their life;

and I see this problem, and I'm concerned about it.

And I could win this point — I could beat up on them, I could go around to other people and get them to agree with me, and get *everybody* to look down on that person.

But is this the response that will be healthiest for me, and for the community?

Here's how Jesus put it:

47 Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him.

48 Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes [in the original Greek, this word is really more along the lines of “takes in hand” — in other

words, Whoever warmly receives] **this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all — he is the greatest.**”

What is he saying?

He’s saying I claim to be a follower of Christ, living by his teachings, but it doesn’t really wash...

it’s not really genuine...

Not unless I can interact with someone who is weaker than me, or even someone who is **WRONGER** than me — someone who is wrong about something when I’M actually **RIGHT**—

and I can still take care of them...

take their weakness into account and respond to that weakness in love...

take their error, their wrongness, into account and respond to that wrongness with love and care...

instead of taking advantage of it in order to solidify my dominance over them.

I want to think of myself as a loving person, a giving person, a caring person.

But Jesus points to a child who is helpless, with no status, dependent, and he says, **This is the model for greatness in my world.**

He says, My definition of greatness isn’t centered on how theologically correct Doug Brendel is, or how articulate Doug Brendel is in selling his point of view, or how totally Doug Brendel can convince himself or others that Doug has his act together.

Jesus says, My definition of greatness is centered on how prone to failure Doug acknowledges himself to be,

and *how totally dependent Doug is on the example of Jesus.*

That’s the kind of attitude that will make someone truly great. Authentically great.

This is how we’re designed by God to live and thrive.

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Did the disciples get it? Apparently not.

John hears Jesus talking about the least being the greatest, and he figures this *can’t* apply across the board; there must be an exception.

49 “Master,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.”

This is the equivalent of saying, Hey, if it's something really important, at a certain level of importance, then that previous guidance doesn't apply, right?

If someone is doing something good but doing it the wrong way, I should muscle in, right?

I mean, in this case, let's face it, I really am greater, in a way. I'm better. I'm right and they're wrong, and this is really important, so...

Jesus says no.

50 "Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

I need to recognize my tendency to demonstrate a lack of love, and cut people some slack.

* * *

At this point I would hope that Jesus's disciples finally get it. But they seem to be a lot like me. Thick-headed.

51 As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven [in other words, beginning his final year of earthly ministry], Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

52 And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him;

Jesus had a problem, which was that the straightest line from Capernaum, up in Galilee, to Jerusalem, down in Judea, is through Samaria, which had been an enemy of Israel's for centuries.

The Samaritans and the Jews despised each other.

You could go the long way around and avoid Samaritan territory, and in fact this is what most Jewish people did.

But Jesus didn't make a distinction; he was willing to love the Samaritan just as much as he loved the Jew.

Now this would be a journey of several days, 40 miles or so on foot, so what Jesus was doing here was, he was having some of his disciples set up a stopover at a point somewhere between Capernaum and Jerusalem.

It was the equivalent of calling ahead to a Motel 6 in Pittsburgh before you leave home on a road trip to Chicago.

53 but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.

In fact, since the Jewish people were obligated by their religion to visit Jerusalem for a number of different reasons throughout their lifetime, there were often Jewish people traveling to Jerusalem, and it was common for Samaritan bandits to stop them and steal their stuff, even injure them.

So it was no surprise that the people in this Samaritan town told the disciples to get lost;

Jesus had just been willing to give them the benefit of the doubt—believe the best, and give them an opportunity to step up to the gesture and respond warmly.

They didn't.

54 When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”

James and John were brothers.

When Jesus called these two to be his disciples, he gave them a nickname: We find in Mark 3:17 that he started calling them the Sons of Thunder; today we would probably translate it “Thunder Boys.”

It was kind of a joke; I think Jesus was having some fun with this, because these guys were so hot-headed, so quick to get into a scrap with someone.

If you did them wrong, or you did their sister wrong, or you did the leader of their club wrong, they were ready to meet you outside and settle it with their fists.

And the fact is, I have the same tendency.

Maybe not with fisticuffs, but with my words. With whatever quiet, subtle action I can deploy under the radar.

But this doesn't improve my quality of life.

This has the side-effect of cutting me off, closing me off, from relationships.

Maybe I climb the corporate ladder and achieve high status in my profession.

But now I see that other person in my department, basically trashing their family while they claw their way up the career tree, and what do I say to myself?

“You moron.” “You monster.”

But I'm not called to agree with the other person.

I'm not even called to *pretend* to agree with them.

I'm called to love them.

I'm called to let the Spirit, living in me, regulate my natural responses of contempt, and frustration, and rage, and instead offer what Ephesians 4:15 calls "the truth in love."

I need to recognize that my natural instinct is to demonstrate a lack of love. The Spirit of Christ within me, if I tune in to this Spirit, will guide me to a different type of response.

Yes, the Thunder Boys want to squash the "sinners" like a bug. But Jesus instead turns and clobbers THEM.

55 But Jesus turned and rebuked them,

But there's more to learn here — because he ALSO moves on.

56 and they went to another village.

He doesn't hang around and beat a dead horse.

He doesn't let life become consumed in endless debate or conflict with other people.

Jesus did not bring us a message of endless tolerance, sweetness and light.

The example he set for us is: Do what you can, and then move on.

How did Jesus know when it was time to pull the plug on a relationship? How did he decide when to give up laying out more line to a person, and just cut his losses and move on?

I want to know because, frankly, I want to pull the plug on some relationships in my life.

I want to give up on some people, cut my losses and move on.

*Maybe the more important question is, **Why do I want to find such a formula?***

Let's be honest with ourselves ABOUT ourselves:

The fact that I'm so eager for there to be some biblical formula for breaking off relationships

reveals what my natural instinct really is:

My natural preference is to cut off relationships at the first possible opportunity.

I need the Spirit of Jesus to replace my natural instinct with a supernatural instinct,

which is more inclined to *maintain* relationships, to *nurture* relationships, than to end them, to cut them off.

When I start to feel justified in treating someone lovelessly, I need to learn to be suspicious...

because it's awfully easy to go that route.

It's hard to take the higher road, and love someone who displeases me.

Let's ask right now, and every day, to be guided by God's love, clearly guided by God's love, right now, and every day.