



Christ's Perfect Provision-Part 9

When You're Feeling Competitive

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I'm sure that you've noticed that just about everything we do—everything we participate in—has some kind of ranking to it, or some kind of pecking order to it. If you think about your work, I mean, there's probably in your work a sense of who the top salesman is. That's pretty easy to figure out in terms of net sales or whatever it might be, commissions. Even your company itself is, you know, kind of rating itself in some kind of pecking order: Is it a Fortune 500 company? Is it a Fortune 100 company? Those kinds of things are always on people's minds.

Going back to before you got that job, of course you had to tell someone where you graduated in your graduating class, because there's always a ranking there in terms of the graduation and the intelligence accomplishments of the students. Then before that, when you're in Little League, people cared about where does your team stand in the standings? And you made it through that division? Did you go on to that? And if you did, where did you end up? And how did you, you know, rank when it was all done? This is just normal.

Speaking of sports, you know, every sport has rankings, and they don't care just who's gonna win this match or that tournament, or who's best in the state—they have what's called the world rankings. And I mean, I don't care what the sport is, someone is going to be hailed as the greatest, as the top. Whether it's golf—whichever. In a weekend, you see the ratings: who's the number one golfer? Who's the number two, who's the number three? Or if it's ping pong—wing, whoo, by the way, is the number one ping pong player in the world right now. That matters. It's soccer; doesn't matter if it's tennis; doesn't matter what it is. Mike Van Buren, by the way, number one dart thrower in the world.

Now, the passage we've gotten to is about the disciples engaging in that kind of thinking—rankings. And the way that this starts in Luke 9 uses a superlative. They were talking about who's the greatest. Now, the problem with this text is you may read it and immediately say, I'm exempt, because I never think about that. Now, I realize that when—whew—you probably don't think, Am I better than him? Am I the greatest? Maybe I should be the number one seeded table tennis player in the world. You don't think that.

But if we're at a home fellowship group, and there happens to be a ping pong table there, and I come over—I mean, you want to know if you can beat Pastor Mike playing ping pong. I doubt it. But maybe.



I mean, I don't know. Perhaps. Or there's a dartboard. I got to my darts. I know, pull out my little dart case. Are you better? I don't know. We need to play and find out. You may, in the right settings, start making the comparatives. You may not speak in terms of superlatives, but who's the best in this circle?

Now it's unique because we're dealing with the Twelve, and the Twelve knew: here is the Messiah, here is the God-man, he is the Christ of God, and they're in the inner circle. And so the wording of our text, which starts here in Luke 9, is worded in superlatives—who is the greatest. But I think the problem is very much applicable to our lives, because in our little circles, we start wondering, you know, just kind of where do I stand in all this? Not as relates to ping pong or darts. I mean, what really matters is when we're sitting around at home fellowship group saying, well, that answer was kind of lame. You'd never say that. I hope you wouldn't say that. But you think, wow, that guy doesn't really know the Bible as well as I do. Obviously, not a lot of insight there.

Or that lady starts saying, Would you pray for my kids? They're out of control, and got suspended from school. And you would never say, Man, you must be a lot worse at parenting than me. But you might think it. You know, I don't know, I'm sure that we disciplined our kids well, and we had better parameters and boundaries. And I mean, you know, it's too bad that she hasn't invested in those early years the way she should have. It's easy for us to start making these comparisons.

So as we read this text, I'd like you to open up to it if you haven't already—Luke 9:46–50. Don't dismiss it as something you would never engage in because we happen to see that the question is who is the greatest. We do the same thing. We are tempted—at least, I mean, I can say that universally—we're all tempted to try and figure out the pecking order in our little circles. And so this corrective of Christ is super important for us. Don't miss it. Christ diagnoses the problem, seeks to correct the problem. It's one that can save us a lot of grief if we can learn the lesson the disciples were about to learn here.

Verse 46, Luke 9: “An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.” But Jesus, knowing—now notice this—“the reasoning of their hearts.” Now, a lot of this wasn't going out of their mouth. I mean, it was an argument. But even in this text we have this very strong word here that's translated “reasonings.” It's something going on in the machinations of their mind. They're thinking this through, and it's going on in their hearts—which, by the way, sidebar real quick in the margin, if you don't already know this (and hopefully I've adequately convinced you of this in the past), we've got to make sure we don't misread the Bible. So often people read a passage about the heart and they think it's the seat of emotions, like we do in our culture with our idioms. But in reality, you want to talk about emotions and feelings, we talked about the gut—the word *splanchnon*—in our bowels. It's why that didn't translate when it comes to Valentine's Day; you don't see a picture of intestines there: “I



love you.” But in their day, when they said “heart,” they meant the center of our reasoning. So we go here; they went here. This is the center of how I think. And so in this text, if there’s no other passage to prove it to you, this should be pretty clear: knowing the reasonings (which is a very mental word) of their hearts, the core of who they were.

Christ is going to illustrate the corrective with a kid. “He took a child and put him by his side. And then he said” these words (v. 48): “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.”

Now, that’s probably where I would end this text, and we’d call it a preaching portion. I figured out how much to preach this Sunday, and I would stop there. But I couldn’t stop there because of the second word in verse 49: “John”—what?—“answered.” So this is a head-scratcher when you first read it, because you look at what’s going on in verses 49 and 50. You think, well, how does this relate? Well, that’s a question you have to figure out. And I think today together, we can figure this out. Because the word here is that John, when he speaks up, is not saying, New topic, Lord. He’s saying, I’ve got something to say about what you just said. “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.’” Now he’s referring to what most believe is a proverb of the day. More on this when we get to Luke 11, because we’ll see the inverse of it there. But for today, he says, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.” “For the one who’s not against you is for you.” So don’t stop that guy.

Now these two little scenes, these two little topics here—they’re not little, they’re big topics—but they’re crunched together with the word “answered,” and we have to try and figure this all out. Let’s start with verses 46–48 and think through what’s going on. It should be really obvious, and that is they’re sitting around wondering, Where do I stand in the pecking order of the Twelve? They’re trying to compare themselves to one another. And if you’re ever going to figure out where you are in the pecking order, you have to look—Nathanael, at some point, has to look over at Thomas and say, And where am I, in terms of the essential role in this thing? Where am I in terms of giftedness? Where am I in terms of wisdom? Where am I in terms of knowledge, or whatever it might be? There has to be that comparison. And at some point, you’re gonna have to say, If I’m above him, then I am better than him—let’s word it that way. Because we still do that. I don’t care if you’re with one of the apostles or whether you’re a brand-new Christian. At some point, you’re going to sit across and say, You know what, I’m better than him or her. And you’re going to make that comparison. And you’re going to make that statement.



So jot that down, number one, and let's deal with this—which is a problem because Jesus has to correct it. So what we have in verses 47 and 48 is a response to them reasoning. Some of it is verbal, and a lot of it's just going on in their hearts where they're trying to figure out: Where are the standings here? Am I more knowledgeable or more biblical? Am I more seasoned? Am I more fruitful? Am I more sage? Am I more effective? Am I more influential? Am I more spiritual? Am I more biblical? Whatever it might be, that's going on in their minds, and it goes on in our minds. And there are some points of application Jesus wants to make. There's one primary one that Luke deals with in verse 48. Now, if you were to study the parallel passage in Matthew 18, you'd find that when Christ pulled this kid—this prepubescent child—in front of these hairy, full-grown apostles, making a contrast here, Jesus made at least three points of application. Now Luke only records the center one that Matthew has—1, 2, 3—Luke takes the second one, which is primary to the question, but there are some ancillary points that are made, and I think the first one for sure is applicable, and we should definitely deal with it because it's ancillary to what we're dealing with. And it certainly fits the idea of how it must have felt when what you're about to get in verse 48 is, Let's consider you accepting this kid in my name. And then let's just consider that as someone who's not to be referred to or thought of in terms of his inherent importance, but in the endowed importance, because you're receiving him in my name.

Before we ever get to that and explain it—if I said that too fast, you didn't catch it, don't worry, I'm coming back to it—but before he said that, he brings a kid there. And you realize what he's doing is he's going to compare them and their relationships with each other—those hairy, full-grown apostles—to this prepubescent kid. And he's going to make the analogy: “Hey, Philip, before you look at Thomas, I just want you to picture the person that you're going to demean in your own mind as thinking he's less or inferior; I want you to think of this kid as him for a second.” He's going to compare them to children.

Now, in Luke 17 (Matthew points out what Jesus actually said in this regard in Matthew 18), the first thing Jesus says about this, at least that's recorded, is: “Unless you become like a child”—and the word is *strephō*; the word is to convert or to change—“unless you change the way you think about yourself, unless you change the way you act, unless you change and become like a child, you can't even enter the kingdom of God.” So the first point when we think about Jesus pulling a kid in here and saying, Let's think of you guys as kids, is something about them kind of humbling their view of themselves and thinking about, no, wait a minute, I guess as it relates to God, I am a kid. And Jesus makes that point all the time: you want to be a Christian, you'd better see yourself as needy, as dependent, and as incapable, because I need to now provide your need, I need to empower you, I need to meet your needs, I need to do the things that you couldn't do on your own. Christ comes to fulfill perfect human righteousness. Let's first admit the problem of sin, and that you have a whole bunch of deficiencies that need to be met in Christ.



That idea of comparison, as he starts to solve the problem of lateral comparisons, is a vertical comparison. So let's start with that. If you follow that, let's jot it down, and then we'll reinforce it. Letter A: you start feeling competitive, you start having those feelings—I'm more biblical or more knowledgeable, I'm more gifted, I'm more essential to whatever it might be—as it relates to your comparison to another Christian, let's first start with this: Hey, pick on someone your own size, if you will, and compare yourself with God. Letter A, compare yourself with God. I was tempted to put down—this is my point—put yourself in perspective. But I want to tell you how to put yourself in perspective, and that is as we compare each other, let's compare ourselves with one another as though we're a bunch of kids, because in reality, anyone who's a Christian has to see themselves that way—at least in terms of needy, dependent, and incapable.

I'm not asking for immaturity. Paul said, laid aside childish things. When I was a kid, I reasoned like a child, I thought like a child. I don't do that. We're not talking about immaturity. I'm not talking about silliness or foolishness. We're talking about the fact that kids don't sit around and wonder whether or not there's enough gas in the van to get them to church. They just hop in when mom says, "Let's go." They don't worry about, "Is the insurance paid up?" They don't worry about, "What kind of oil did you put in? Synthetic oil this month?" No—don't care about any of that. They trust and they get in and they follow. That is what every Christian has to do, which basically puts us all in the same bucket or the same category. God is provider; we are recipient. God is the giver of the needs that we have; we are the needy. So in that regard, it kind of helps us already to start to see that we're all just—we're all just some variation of needy. You got that? We're some variation of incapable; we're some variation of dependent, because God is the one who gives all things.

Here's a verse we should probably ponder a lot more than we do: Romans 11:36. Let me just quote it for you—sounds poetic. Here it comes: it's talking about God—"For from him and through him and to him are all things." Follow that now: from him and through him and to him are all things. So from him, every good and perfect gift comes. If I have anything going for me, God has to give it to me. And then through him—if I'm going to do anything or accomplish anything, it has to be done through—he has to be the one who sustains and provides and does that kind of sustaining work in and through me. And then to him—everything really is for him. He creates us for his glory. And so I am trying to see my life, my worth, my value, my measure of who I am—what does this do for him? From him, through him, to him are all things.

With that in view, I want you to turn real quickly—keep your finger where we're at in Luke 9—and turn with me, if you would, to 1 Corinthians 4. If we're just some variation of dependent recipients, then what we need to start with is seeing that for what it is in comparison with God and saying, We're all a bunch of kids here, in the minivan, if you will. We're all dependent. When we drive through, we don't have to dig in our wallets—God provides. We're the people that realize without God, we're nothing. And we've got to recognize that everything we have is derived.



Now, when kids sit around in the minivan, if you will, of the church, and say, I'm better than that guy, I'm better than that guy, the first thing to remember is, they're all variations of dependent. They're all variations of needy, because everything they have has been given to them. They didn't go out and get a job and education and earn it. Verse 7—if you know your Bibles, by the way, we're dealing with the first few chapters of Corinthians, a bunch of factionalism in the church where they're saying, "I'm of Paul," "I'm of Apollos," "I'm of Cephas," or Peter. And they're all trying to say our group's better than your group, and Peter's a better teacher than Apollos—"No, no, Paul's a better teacher than Peter." And so they're trying to sit there and laterally compare themselves. And when it comes down to it, Paul says: Let's just say there is a difference. Let's just say that you sit there and say, "Hey, yeah, everyone can see I'm more gifted, I'm more talented, I'm more fruitful, I'm more effective, I'm more knowledgeable, I'm more theologically astute." Let's just say people can recognize that.

Verse 7: "For who sees anything different in you?" And they might. "But"—here's the real thought—"What do you have that you did not receive?" It's all been given to you—from him are all things. "And then if you received it," if you're the dependent, needy recipient of those things, "why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" Why do you act like it's inherent in you? Why do you think that and you talk like—or you think or even reason in your heart like—well, this is something I alone have accomplished? You can't think that way.

That's hard for people who aren't Christians. If you're sitting in this room and you don't even get all this, you think, "Well, that's silly. I worked for it. I did it. I did whatever." And you may say, Well, if you're a Christian, it's the same way: you go study the Bible, you spend time in prayer, you become more godly or disciplined or whatever—look. But here's the thing: I can't do anything without God, and neither can you. The synapse in your brain cannot fire electrical pulses without God, who is consisting everything in his power. The Bible says, "In him you live and move and have your being." So clear in the Bible. God turns his back on you right now? You implode. Without God making sure that your body oxygenates your blood with every inhale and exhale of your lungs—it doesn't happen. God sustains all things. He gives you everything moment by moment and second by second. And that should let us recognize, with what God has given me, if he has empowered me, guided me to some accomplishment that I look across the small group and I say, Listen, clearly I'm superior to that person—what you need to say, first of all, is just get yourself in perspective. You got to think about who you are in relation to God.

Back one chapter, 1 Corinthians 3. I've used words like variations of needy, variations of dependent, variations of incapable—but if you want to use the word that Paul used, you gotta get it from this passage. Verse 5, 1 Corinthians 3:5: "What then is Apollos?" He's a brilliant Bible teacher. "What then is Paul?" He's the authorized apostle; he's done miracles. None. "They are servants, through whom you



believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” Could have been the apostle Apollos; it could have been the Bible teacher Paul—God decided all that on his divine chessboard. And that was God’s decision—who would be what and play what role. “I planted,” Paul says—you know what, I may have come in and planted; I may have given you the gospel at first. “Apollos watered”—he may have come in and taught you after that. “But God gave the growth.” From him, through him, to him are all things. So here it is—he’s gonna name it now: “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything.” You want to invert that? Nothing. We’re variations of nothing. That’s not hyper-humility. That’s not false self-effacement. That’s the reality. You got some accomplishment, you’ve got some knowledge, you’ve done something good, your kids have turned out fine? God’s gracious gift. And when you see something less, that old phrase that our grandparents used to say would be employed at this point: There but for the grace of God go I. You have to believe that—that were it not for God’s grace and his provision and his giving in your life, his generosity, you’d be the worst of the worst. But there but for the grace of God go I. “Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

Now, I know that’s a pretty big, far-reaching theological point, but we gotta start there, as he brings a child—who’s the image, picture, and ultimate illustration of dependence, neediness, and incapability. All you guys need to start there.

Then back to our text, Luke 9:48. You gotta think, “Whoever receives this child”—now he’s just making a statement. Think this through. Where he’s just now in this illustration saying, I just want you to see this kid. And I’m telling you, as a command here in this illustration, receive this kid. Receive him not on his own merit; receive him not because of his own inherent worth. You receive him not because he’s better than you. Don’t esteem him because he’s more talented than you or smarter than you. You receive him—look at it, underlined in my Bible—“in my name.” And by the way, if you receive someone I told you to receive, and I told you to receive him in my credit and in my worth and in my name, I just want to remind you—just so you’re not fooled by this very cloaked deity in this incarnate state—I just want to remind you: if you receive the Messiah, the humble servant, the bondservant, okay, you receive the one who sent me—the one that you Jewish boys went to Sabbath school and learned about—where the seraphim can’t even look at him, they shield their eyes in his presence; the train of his robe fills the temple, as Isaiah 6 says. You have a glorious God surrounded by the burning ones, the seraphs, who sit there and fly around in this picture of the throne. You have just received him. You’ve just esteemed him. You’ve just accepted him. You’ve just spoken well of him in this analogy where he says, I’m just going to tell you: Would you receive this kid in my name?

This happens even without the statement. If you were to flip the channels and watch old Trump on The Apprentice—don’t look at me like you haven’t seen the show. You’ve seen the show. And you’ve seen the show where he sits in his—I mean, you might as well call it a throne; he’s really got a blue chair in the boardroom. He can sit there and do all of that with all the power sitting on the—I don’t know—200th floor of the Trump Towers. I know it’s not that tall. But that’s what they want. And here he is, an



owner. And then what you realize is he's flanked by who in most shows these days? Ivanka—Ivanka, his daughter—and Donald Jr., Donny.

Now, he'll often say at the beginning of the task (probably revealing too much about my TV watching habits, but okay), I think and watch *The Apprentice* to see how clueless these celebrities are. Everybody thinks they're so great, and they're a bunch of babies. You watch the show. When they start the task, old Donald—inflated Donald senior—who's really done something with his life—you want to talk about a guy, I mean, he's gone out there, the ruthless real estate Manhattan guy. And so you sit there and say, well, gotta have some respect for that guy. And he's flanked by Ivanka and Donny. And then he basically says, "Oh, for this task, you know, my eyes and ears—of course, Ivanka and Donald Jr." And so now all these rich celebrities are just sitting there. Now they're supposed to make pies or whatever they're supposed to do. They go off and realize that in that statement, Donald says, You accept them in my name. You do that.

So that when Ivanka walks into the pie place or whatever: "Hey boys, how's the task going?" "Here, Geraldo, step to it,"—because all of a sudden now the brass is here. Now, what in the world has Ivanka done? Now, I get it, she's old enough to have accomplished some things on her own. But she's born with a silver stinking spoon in her mouth. What did she do? She was raised in the lap of luxury. There's no reason for these celebrities to give respect to that girl, except for the fact that's the kingpin's daughter. So I accept and esteem and treat you and act a certain way in front of you because I am seeing you, accepting you, esteeming you, communicating with you because I see you in the name of your father. Changes everything.

Here in the text it says: Let's just imagine you're Mr. Accomplished among the celebrities, if you will—hate to stretch this illustration as far as I'm stretching it—but let's just say you're one of those celebrities and you're in that group. Now here comes this silver spoon, pampered, trust-fund child who walks through the doors of your little deal or whatever it is you're doing. And you have no reason to esteem that person on their own merits—none. You're looking at it—it's like the apostles who've been out casting out demons looking at this prepubescent child standing next to Christ, pulled out of the crowd, and he's like, What's going on here? And Jesus: "Accept him in my name. My eyes and ears for this task are going to be junior now—accept him in my name." So they say, Okay, well, yeah, we'll have to do that. "Just remember, how you treat him, how you're treating me. What you said, what you said to me." Accept him in my name. Receive him in my name. And just remember, if you receive them in my name—the Messiah's name—you're really receiving him like you're receiving the incarnate, immortal one who dwells in unapproachable light, the God of the universe. Ooh. Now, how would you treat that little one? With great respect.



He said, Now, put the kid away for a second. Bottom of verse 48: “Now, hey Nathanael, Philip, Thomas, Peter, James, John—whoever is least among you”—the one we never even think in the same way: “The guy’s not gifted at all. I’m not—I can’t believe he made it into the Twelve.” Listen, “the least among you”—here it is—“he is the one who is great.” What does that mean? I’ve endowed every single one of you with my name. I’ve endowed every single one of you with a relationship with me. If you treat them a certain way, or treat me a certain way, you need to esteem that one in relation to me in your mind.

I worded it this way on the outline, letter B: After all of that, here’s what I’m trying to say: You need to see others as the greatest kids—the greatest kids. Let the illustration sink in. When you, in your small group, have Mr. Lame Commentary across the way saying something again that you think, “Oh man, come on—do you even know what we’re talking about here? I mean, did you even hear the sermon? Come on, man.” Just remember who you’re dissing in that meeting is one that Christ has said, “Receive them in my name.” Here’s the eyes and ears. Here’s the child of mine. You treat him a certain way; you treat me a certain way. That’s how the Apostle Paul can say in Philippians 2, “Hey you guys, esteem others as more important than yourselves.” How can I do that if I know I’m really smarter, more gifted, done a better job parenting, or whatever it might be? How can I really esteem that loser better than myself? Because you need to see them and accept them as children of the Greatest.

And I might have a bratty kid—I gotta be careful how I start these illustrations. Go back in time: my kids are little. I mean, I might have a little fussy baby, but I hand off my baby to you—if you have any respect for your pastor—and I say, “Would you watch my fussy little baby for a little while?” And you take that little baby—does nothing for you—slobbers, poops his pants, all these things. He’s just a mess. And yet you’re gonna treat him, I hope, in a way that’s not inherent to his value or his worth as a person, but because he is my kid. You gotta start looking at people in your small group that way. You gotta start looking at people in the church that way. See others as the greatest kids.

And I know one of the problems with this sermon so far, maybe, is: Well, you’re getting me to think about home fellowship group, my sub-congregation in the church, I suppose conversations on the patio. But my real problem with looking down at people comes at my workplace. Because, you know, they are not—they are losers, Mike. They’re going to hell. They’re non-Christians. They’re pagans. Of course I’m better than them.

Let me blow your mind here, right? You need to recognize something about every single human being on the planet—every person at your workplace that you want to put down—and you say, “Well, I’m a child of the King and they’re not.” I just want you to remember something that God says about every non-Christian on the planet. Ready for this? Genesis 9. Don’t turn to any of these; we don’t have time



for it. Genesis 9: They get off the ark. Whole new environment. Hostile world. Now we don't have enough vegetation on the planet because of the shifting of the whole environment—do some study on this, it's a radically different world. And he says, "Okay, now you're sanctioned to eat the animals on the planet." But it's going to be a bit of a hostile environment. It's going to be, certainly, a hunted-and-hunter situation. "But here's the thing: sometimes those animals are going to turn on you and maul you. So I just need to say this: Remember, the life of a human being is far different than the life of anything else on the planet. It's not like a plant; it's not like an animal. And if someone is killed, I will require a reckoning for their blood." I'm talking about people now, because I've just told you, you can eat the animals. He says even if an animal mauls and kills someone in your family, I will require a reckoning of that life for that animal's life. That's why in the Law hundreds of years later Moses could say, If your ox mauls a person, you gotta put the—you gotta put the ox down. Because there will be a reckoning of life for that person. Taking the life—or in this case, that animal—has gotta be a reckoning.

And then he goes on to say, "And I will require it also from man, from his fellow man." Yes, I know, that's crazy. "I will require a reckoning for the life of a man." Verse 6, Genesis 9: "Whoever sheds the blood of a man, by man shall his blood be shed." Now whether you—I don't care where you stand on capital punishment, I just want you to know the reason for this. Here it comes. He says, "For God made man in his own image."

You get called in for jury duty in Santa Ana. You go there and you get actually picked to be on the jury. And it's a murder case. It's actually—well, I know we don't follow the Bible anymore—but let's just say it's a murder with special circumstances, which in that point puts into play the death of that person—capital punishment. When you're picked for the jury and you hear all the evidence, and it's clearly a heinous crime with malice aforethought, and you think, Well, by the law here it's like he should die. "But before we render our verdict, we just want a little bit about the person that was killed. That person—were they... I want to interview some of their workmates—kind, generous? I'd like to talk to the neighbor. That neighbor—were they... I mean, if that neighbor came over wanting, you know, to borrow a shovel, would this guy that was murdered—would he be generous and give it? Well, how did he do with money and finances? Was he good? How much did he give to charity?"

See, none of that is part of the discussion, and nor should it be. Why? This passage is not about "require life for life if the life that was killed was really a good life." If it was really neat, like a godly life, we gotta find out whether they're even right with God. No—no one can ask, "Hey, what was their relationship with God like, this person that was killed?" It doesn't matter who it is. I don't care if it was the lowest of the low in our society. I don't care if it was some person that couldn't even pay his taxes, defaulted on their loans. I don't care who the person was. The text says, because they were made in the image of God, they have inherent worth.



And when you look at a non-Christian in your workplace and the competitive rivalry and the jealousy comes in, and you start doing things and your thoughts and the reasoning of your heart to put them down, to malign them, to mock them—whatever it is—so that you can see yourself as superior, I just want you to remember: it may be like these apostles who’ve done some pretty dramatic things and that little kid, and you may be saying, Fine, I can put my foot on the head of that person and climb this ladder and recognize that really I am of more inherent worth. Just remember: even if they’re non-Christians, you have no right to do that, for one reason—because they’re image-bearers of the divine, eternal God.

Ephesians 3:14—if you’re taking notes—goes even further. Paul says, “I bow my knees” to pray “before the Father,” the Father “from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” Name means something much more broad in biblical terminology than it does in our language today. But you do follow what he’s saying here: the paternity of God—it stretches over all mankind. Every family in heaven and on earth—family tree—is one that you can trace back, and God is ultimately the Dad of every human being on the planet. Am I a universalist? Of course not. Am I saying everyone goes to heaven? Of course not. But when someone says, “They’re all children of God,” and you smirk at that because you know they’re not adopted, redeemed children of God—be careful before you smirk and roll your eyes, because the Bible says the Father is the one from whom everyone is derived, and he sees himself as the Father of all mankind. It’s like that old hymn, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.” I mean, it is the truth, and we need to affirm it.

So in a sense, you are putting down someone and not receiving them with any reference to God, because you think, “Well, I’m off the hook because they’re not Christians.” Here’s one that’s even more severe: 1 Timothy 4:10. 1 Timothy 4:10 says, “We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.” Now, that “especially” is the understatement of the epistle, right? Wow. Yeah. Are you talking about salvation? I mean, I would only even say that God is the Savior of non-Christians in the sense that he is the Savior of Christians because their sins are forgiven on the cross. I’m with you on that. But the Bible says there is a parallel between the salvation that you have in eternal life and the salvation that non-Christians have right here and now. Oh, it’s temporal. It’s short-lived. But my neighbor who sits at home, has no interest in coming to church, just had his coffee, read his paper this morning—not going to worship God, not going to say thanks to God, not gonna honor God, not gonna glorify God this week—that person, the Bible says, is saved right now by God. Eternal? No. Heaven? No. Gonna avoid the judgment of God? No—not unless he repents and puts his trust in Christ. But God is actively saving everyone. What does that mean? He’s still alive. He’s processing his coffee in his body. He’s reading the paper, and the synapses of his brain are processing truth. He’s talking to his wife. He’s going for a walk this afternoon. He’s cuddling up in his bed and fluffing his little down pillow and having a nice sleep as he snores away next door. All of that, the Bible says, is a provision of God. He’s the Savior of all people.



So before we start saying, “Well, you know what, this competitiveness and me looking down at people is okay if it’s non-Christian,” I understand that Christians have a special place and should have a special place in our lives. But before you think you’ve got license now to go be very dismissive of non-Christians: they’re image-bearers; God is their Father—might put an asterisk next to that: not in the same way he’s our Father—but he is their Father. And he’s also their Savior—not in the same way he’s our Savior—but he’s also. Did you follow that? Be careful that we don’t look down on, because I don’t care if it’s the punky kid with his hat on backwards skating on the steps of your business and you’ve told him a hundred times not to, and you want to look at that kid in such a dismissive way. I understand. I’m not saying we don’t hold people accountable for their behavior. But he is an image-bearer of the living God. And God is his Father. And God is also his Savior. Don’t take those statements out of context, but they’re in the Bible. And it means that I’ve got to esteem them.

Now, I can add the highlight and the turbo to this just by saying, hey, if that’s the way he feels toward humanity in general, think of how he feels about people that the Bible says he’s redeemed with his own blood. Wow. I’m quoting now Acts 20:28: “Care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” We better be especially caring for Christians. I know I quote this passage from time to time, but if you haven’t written it down lately, write it down: Zechariah 2:8. It’s a passage speaking of the beloved people of God, the covenant people of God—God has placed his grace upon them—and he says this: “If you touch them, you touch the apple of my eye.”

Now I heard that verse as a kid; I had no idea what it meant. I pictured something silly in my mind. But “the apple of the eye,” the idiom in Hebrew is the lens of your eye that you look through—that little clear, glossy thing in your head. You’re looking through that. The text says you start messing with the people of God, you start messing with the eyeballs of God. You can high-five me on the way out; you can shake my hand; if you’re touchy-feely, you can give me a hug when the sermon is over. Just don’t stick your finger in my eye. “Hey, Pastor Mike, how you doing?” “What are you doing?”—is not going to engender a good response from me if you stick your finger in my eye. Every time. I don’t care if I’m sleeping—don’t come up and stick your finger in my eye; I will wake up and can’t be responsible for all that may happen after that. It will engender a poor response from me. God just wants you to know: My special, beloved, covenant people that are mine twice over—as my children, and twice over as those I’ve saved—and not only saved them every day in their lives, I’ve saved them from eternal judgment at the price of my Son’s own blood—you’d better not mess with them. You’d better be very esteeming and kind to them. Am I saying we never hold them accountable for sin? I’m not saying that. I’m just saying you better see others as the greatest kids.

Now, we can think simplistically about this. And you can say, well, like Christians do with a lot of topics—if it’s wrong in that case, here’s an easy way to look at it, very one-dimensionally: just let’s



think it's wrong. It's wrong. We do that with a lot of topics. And we shouldn't do it with this. Because if I started this sermon, as I did, by talking about world rankings, talking about ranking in school and ranking in business and ranking as a salesman and ranking in sports, and if I were to ask you, Is there a world ranking for Christians? I think most people would be inclined after the introduction to say, "No, it's wrong; Jesus asked us to correct them for that." No—read your Bible carefully. That's not wrong. Matter of fact, it's certainly true. There is a world ranking for Christians. There is. There is a pecking order, even in your small group. Did you know that? God looks at that and he knows.

When Jesus was sitting there, Zebedee's wife came and says, "I got a request for you: James and John want to sit one at your right and one at your left. Now I'll let you choose which one's which, Jesus, but I gotta have my kids number one and number two in your kingdom." You know what Jesus said to that? "Oh, stop it with all that ranking stuff. There's no pecking order in the kingdom. Oh, that's silly. We're all the same." Is that what he said? Clearly, with that inflection? You know Jesus did not say that. What did he say? He said, "Even what you're asking for—are your kids able to drink the cup that I'm going to drink?"—which is a metaphor for saying, Are they willing and able to suffer and sacrifice the way I'm going to suffer and sacrifice? They want to be near me in the kingdom; they want the high ranking on the top of the pecking order. See, he's making a parallel between the way we live our Christian life now—and the suffering and the difficulty and the persecution we're willing to go through—for how it turns out in the kingdom. And he says, I can't say that right now. He says it's really up to the Father, and he will determine who sits on my right hand and my left.

Now, this is important for us to catch. Let's jot it down this way—letter C: You've got to wait for Christ's world ranking. I don't want to in any way deflate your passion to live for Christ in a way that has a view to reward. Very important. When Peter sat there and said to Jesus, "Hey, you know what, this rich young ruler won't follow you and give away his stuff. We've left everything to follow you." Jesus said, "Yeah, yeah. And you know what? Wait till the world rankings come out. You Twelve are going to sit on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. You'll be the top of the top. This is going to be the top twelve." That's why this whole discussion probably started: "Well, who's top in the top twelve?" They wanted to know. Why? Because it was a biblical point—there is a ranking.

What's the problem? Well, the rankings haven't come out yet. The tournament's not over, at least from our perspective. We need to realize the one reason I'm not going to think about rankings in my church—in Christendom today—or in our small group, I'm not going to think about who's the greatest here? Well, one of the reasons I'm not going to really dwell on that or give that much thought is because the game's not over yet. The battle's still waging. There's one thing you do not want a soldier to do in the heat of battle: to be sitting there thinking about, "What ribbon can I earn for this? I wonder what medal—if I were to run from here to there and shoot while there—I wonder, could I earn a medal for that? And then would that medal be better than that guy's?" Stop with all that. You don't want the



rankings or the standings to motivate someone when he stands over a putt. We're talking about the rankings on golfers or tennis players—you don't want them sitting there focused on that.

I don't know if you've turned from 1 Corinthians—I know we've been back in our text—but there is a passage that you need to look at, or at least let me read to you and concentrate on what it says: 1 Corinthians 4:5. One of the reasons it's futile for you to look across the room and say, "Well, yeah, I know that person—definitely more godly than me." You don't even know that. Why? Because there's a lot of things that we can't even see right now. The rankings are going to come out, but it's going to be a thorough evaluation. Verse 5, after—remember the context—"I'm of Paul, I'm of Apollos, I'm of Cephas"—everyone's thinking this group's better than that group, that guy's better than that guy. Listen: "Do not pronounce judgment before the time." Well, when are we going to get to know all this? "Before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness." That's the problem with you evaluating who's greatest—you can only see surface things. You can only see what they say, what you think they've accomplished. You can never see the secret things. As he goes on to say, "He will also disclose the purposes" (or the motives) "of people's hearts. Then" (when all things are on the table) "each one will receive his commendation from God." Not condemnation—that's for non-Christians—commendation. Where is the pecking order of the kingdom? And will it matter? Absolutely it'll matter. "You take charge of ten cities; you take charge of five cities; you take charge of two cities." What's with all that variation? It's how God is going to do it. But don't try to figure it out before the time. Don't say—you don't know what's going on in people's hearts. The world rankings will come out; I just don't want you to spend much time focusing on that now.

Now, I know we have no time left. But in a perfect world, I'd say that's half the message. I won't say that, because it's not true. I'm going to break some world records right now. Number one, quickest point: world standings, verses 49 and 50—I have to deal with this. And I have to say that some of you so far in the sermon can say, "Well, I did deal with that earlier in my Christian life. I don't do much of that." Great. Personal comparisons is one thing. But John answers, and now he's speaking corporately. He's speaking about his group. "Master, we saw someone casting out a demon"—verse 49, Luke 9—"in your name. We tried to stop him because he is not with us. He doesn't follow with us. He's not in our group." And Jesus said, "Do not stop him."

That may surprise John—his answer to this thing about "Don't, you know, sit there and compare each other because..." "And what about those guys? They're not in your name, are they? Those people over there—they're doing something. This guy's casting out demons, but he's not with us. So, I mean, stop him. We tried to stop him." "Don't stop him. For the one who is not against you"—that'd be a good phrase to underline—not against you—"is for you." Now they thought—note, tie these phrases together, bottom of verse 50—they thought they're not for us because (verse 49) they weren't with us (bottom of verse 49). So they said, "Listen, they're not in our little group—and because they're not in



our group, which is the top tier, right? The Twelve—they're over here." Jesus: "But they're not against you, and so actually they're for you, not against you."

Now, clarify two kinds of exorcists real quick. The exorcists of Matthew 7—Matthew 7, and you know the passage. It's there quoted all the time, where Jesus says this (v. 22): "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not'"—one of the things is—"cast out demons in your name?" And he'll say, "Depart from me; I never knew you, you who practice lawlessness." Now follow this: we know those guys are against Christ because they are lawless. And as John says, man, you can say all you want, you're with Christ—but if your life is antithetical to that, if by your deeds (as Paul said to Titus) you deny him, you're not with Christ; you are against Christ; you are antichrist, John says. So I know we're not talking about those guys—people that by their lifestyle deny the truth.

Here's another one—remember that story about the seven sons of Sceva? What a terrible name—seven sons of Sceva. In Acts 19:15 we see what happens. And—no, that's a terrible name; it really doesn't represent the truth. Talk about Ivanka and Donny Trump—these guys were the seven sons of the high priest. They had nice clothes; they had the pedigree; they had the education. They hear that Christ's name, you know, was something that was being used to cast out demons. So they wanted to use that as like a magical incantation. And so they go and try it. And what happens? Well, if you know your Bible, this demon-infested man rips all those nice designer clothes off their back, and they have to leave this building bruised and wounded and naked, because this demon went all crazy on 'em through this demoniac.

We're not talking about those, because—look at the text again—"Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name." Well, this is the switch from "Listen, I'm better than him" to number two, "We're better than them." This is a corporate comparison. And all I'm saying is the comparison that's being made in this text is between people that are not against Christ because apparently their doctrine (which actually allows them to do successfully what even—John? In verse 40?—wasn't able to do; I say John, I'm not sure who it was among the disciples, because the epileptic dad said, "I tried to get him to cast out the demon, but they couldn't." Here's a guy that was doing it.) So something's going right over there. And they're not against us, because I already know that God says those exorcisms that are against us are living lives contrary to what I teach. So the doctrine and practice of these people are with us; it's just they're not physically with us. You've got to recognize that. That means they're for you. And if they're for you, even though they're not in your little tribe doing things exactly the way, with all the nuances, that you do, they are promoting the doctrine, they're having the product that we want—which is demons being cast out—and they obviously live a life that's in keeping with what we're teaching. Hey, listen, they're real.



And in our terms, let's just put it this way: We need to affirm—esteem—you've already got that on your worksheet; here it comes—all real Christians. I'm not into affirming people that are cultists. I'm not into saying, "Yeah, let's go, you know, heretics." No, not at all. But those who promote Christ, those who teach a biblical gospel, those whose lives are in keeping with the doctrine that they teach—they're real Christians, and I need to affirm them.

I don't have time to take you there, but I did promise at one point, at least on social media, that I was going to deal with this passage. Let me at least give it to you as a homework assignment: Numbers 11:26–29. Numbers 11:26–29. The parallels here are striking. Moses being approached by Joshua because two guys—one guy's name was Eldad, one was Medad. Eldad and Medad. They were out there prophesying; the Spirit of God was on them, and they were teaching the people in Israel. And when Joshua heard about it, he went to Moses and said, "Stop them! Let me stop them." Moses' response—he was a few laps ahead of Peter, James, and John on this—he said this: "Are you jealous, Joshua, for my sake? Would that the Lord would put his Spirit on all his people, that all the Lord's people were prophets." Why? Well, because it wasn't just about affirming them. He was wanting to see the product advanced. And shouldn't the disciples have wanted that? Epileptic dad brings the son you couldn't help; here's a guy doing it—he's with us. He follows our teaching and our practice; he's just not in our group. Why aren't you seeing this as something that you can celebrate?

Number two (or letter B), we need to celebrate kingdom expansion—just to put it in our terms. We want to see the kingdom expanded; we want to see people reached for Christ. Sometimes we'll look across the way and things will be done differently, and we will question motives—even Paul, questioning the motives of people in Philippians 1, says, "Listen, we have to wait for the judgment of God. It looks like they're preaching out of envy, jealousy, and strife. But here's the thing: I'm excited that the truth of the gospel is going out. Some proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition—what then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice." Celebrate kingdom expansion.

And one of the ways to think not so provincially about our ministry or our church is you may say, "Well, I don't look down my nose at other Christians in my church," but it is easy for us to corporately look down our nose at some other church across town. The way to not think so provincially is to think in two ways real quick—chronologically and globally. Think this through now.

Chronologically—Hebrews 11, all these things laid out. You can even think into church history—the people that you admire in church history—certainly in Hebrews 11: Abraham—no, I mean, Abel; you have all these people listed in this thing. And then they're heroes of faith. And then chapter 12 says this: "Hey, now you guys, being surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, run with endurance the



race that is set before you,” which, guess what, looks a little different than the race set before them. For some of these people, you’re 1,400 years after these people; some of them 2,000 years; some more—we don’t even know how many years. And those people, I guarantee you, if they sat down to worship with you, you’d look at them going, “What are you doing? You’re really different and strange.” Yeah, absolutely. If you think chronologically, you think about the heroes of the faith. If you really said, “Okay, let’s do church together,” they’re going to start singing things, doing things, acting—you’d think, What in the world? I don’t get that. But if you can start to think chronologically, and know that your heroes of faith in the Bible and through church history probably do church a lot differently—they probably run their small groups a lot differently than you—that’ll help you.

Secondly, think globally. 1 Peter 5:9: In our fight against Satan, he says, “Resist him, knowing”—love this, here it comes—“knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.” Think globally. And if you’ve done any traveling and connected with any Christians in other cultures—I’ve sat in places, you know, out-of-the-way places that took hours and hours and hours to get to, in the middle of jungles. And I’ve sat there in church services that I just sat amazed: Look at them; they’re preaching Christ. Look at them; they love God. And through translators, they’re asking me a question about how to live for Christ. I love this. And then I get on a plane and I come home. And I realize this: if that church were five miles away and not 5,000 miles away—think about it—I might be pretty critical of it. Why? Well, the church I’m thinking of—no one wore shirts in the service. If the church over on Moulton—“They don’t wear a shirt? What kind of heretics are they? We have nothing to do with those guys.” But I can fly to Papua New Guinea and sit there and go, “This is awesome.” Why? Because they’re far away.

You’ve heard me say this before: the most godly people you know have either been dead for 100 years or live 100 miles away from you. And if you think that through, you think, Why? Well, one of the reasons is you start putting those people close to me, I start feeling uncomfortable. Not to mention that I’m much more critical of people that are close to me. That’s the real point. And I think to myself, if I can just sit there and think Abraham—a lot different than me. If you think about these people that lived—what was that like? And yet we’re brothers. And I think right now around the world, the Christians in the Middle East being persecuted, and I think about the way they are giving their lives and suffering around the world. I’m thinking to myself, Yeah, that’s a very different kind of environment. And even the way they express things—very different. But I gotta realize they’re my brothers in Christ.

If I can think that way and then bring it into my home fellowship group and say, “You know what? Why am I quite so critical about that person?” Celebrate kingdom expansion.



Starts with knowing that God is great and, by comparison, we're some variation of needy, dependent. Then we gotta work at the Christian life focused on Christ, not filled with lateral comparisons. We gotta reset before us—no one said it more eloquently than Dr. Lewis at Oxford—on page 124 of *Mere Christianity*—put it this way: “In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself.” Follow this now: “In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that, and therefore you know yourself as nothing in comparison—well, then you do not know God at all.” Follow that. Unless you know God as that—immeasurably superior—and you know yourself as nothing—well, then you don't know God at all. “And as long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man”—now here's the poetic words—“a proud man is always looking down on other people, and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”

My point is precisely what Hebrews 12 says: my focus on serving Christ—I'm going to struggle, I'm going to run the race so as to win; I'm going to box so as not beating the air; I'm going to discipline, running, making my sleep—and I'm not really worried about the standings. I don't care about the rankings. I just want to serve Christ with my eyes fixed on the author and perfecter of my faith. That gives me no time for lateral comparisons. Not just individually—please, let's get rid of it corporately. Call heretics heretics—absolutely. Let's not be loose about our doctrine. Let's not sit there and look down our nose at people that may not be with us in our small circle.

Let's pray.

God, these are hard truths for us, in that in our flesh we are so inclined to lateral comparisons. We'd like to focus on you and keep our focus there. But with all that goes on in this world, it's hard for us. Because we look at other people, and it's easy to be condescending. We look at the grace of God in our own lives, and we don't see it as grace—sometimes we see it as simple accomplishments. And it's hard for us to esteem others as though we receive them as your kids, in your name. But God, we must resolve to do this. We must stop with all of the rankings and the standings and the comparisons that end up being rivalries and jealousy and envy, that become expressions of pride.

Help us to be in that place where we can say with sincerity, like the Apostle Paul said about himself, whether it's me that planted or Apollos that watered—really, we are nothing. It's about God who causes the growth. So God, give us a kind of biblical humility—not false humility, not some kind of prideful self-effacement; we see a lot of that these days—but a genuine focus on you, not worrying about the rankings or standings, knowing that you're the God that we are to serve, and your children are those we are to accept, and even humanity in general we ought to respect with a certain kind of esteem because of the paternity of God that stretches over all your creation.



So God, we pray that you change our lives because we've heard your word today. In Jesus' name, amen.