

True Greatness: Mark 9:30-41
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What does it mean to be great? That's the main question we'll try to answer this morning. What is true greatness? What comes to your mind when you think of greatness? Last year at our daughter's school they were studying Russia, and I got to dress up as Peter the Great and impersonate him as part of that unit. But was Peter truly great? Is that what it means to be great—to have the adjective attached to your name, to have statues and paintings made of you, to accomplish things that are applauded by the masses, to get a lot of attention, and then to have your name recorded in the history books? Are those the things that define greatness?

Maybe you would want to lower the bar a little bit and say, I don't care about international acclaim, or the paintings or statues or history books. But if I can climb the ladder of success and achieve the American dream and get the house I want and the toys I want and retire with plenty of cash and have people who recognize the value of what I do, then I would consider that greatness. If I can just keep up with the Joneses and even push past the Joneses in certain ways, then I would consider that a life well-lived—a great life.

Is that what you're pursuing? Whether you would state it like that or not, is that functionally what you're striving for in life? Jesus is so good at obliterating our faulty assumptions, and that's what He does in our passage for this morning. He takes that assumption of what greatness is, and He sticks a piece of dynamite in it and blows it up. Jesus is so radical. He's so counter-cultural, which goes to show us how out of whack our culture is, and how messed up we are as sinful human beings. Jesus speaks the truth, and it sounds so radical to us because we are so accustomed to believing lies. We think we know what greatness is, and therefore we go skipping off down that path that says "American Dream" only later to find out that there's no lasting satisfaction to be found there—only emptiness and misery and a sinking feeling that "I wasted it!" I thought I was doing what I should. I thought I was pursuing the right things. But now it's all evaporating before my eyes. There's no substance to it. Don't come to the end of your life and one day wake up to that nightmare.

Instead, listen to the words of Jesus. And no matter how radical it sounds, no matter how counter-cultural it seems, heed His words. Listen to what He says, and do what He says, rather than swallowing hook, line and sinker the lies of this world.

Let's turn our attention to this passage now, which has three sections to it. In the first section, Jesus tells His disciples about His death and resurrection, but they're confused. In the second section, the disciples arrogantly argue about who is the greatest, and Jesus tells them what true greatness is. And in the third section, the disciples are feeling jealous toward someone who is experiencing success, and Jesus rebukes them for it. So here are the three simple headings that I'll use, three words that summarize what is going on with the disciples in each of these conversations they have with Jesus. First, confusion. Second, pride. And thirdly, jealousy.

Confusion (verses 30-32)

If these verses sound familiar, it's because Mark recorded a similar conversation in chapter 8. And it's going to happen again in chapter 10. Three times Jesus foretells His death and resurrection, and each time the disciples are confused. They don't get it. How could the Messiah suffer? That just doesn't compute. In 8:29 Peter made his great confession, saying to Jesus, "You are the Christ." But then right after that Jesus told them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. And do you remember what Peter did? He took Jesus aside and rebuked Him. And then Jesus rebuked Peter.

Now we come to Jesus' second statement about His death and resurrection. "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." Here are a couple things for us to think about with regard to this statement.

First, this should be a reminder to us that everything in the Bible is pointing to Christ on the cross. From the beginning of the Old Testament there are pointers to Christ, and to His suffering. The serpent bruising His heel (Genesis 3:15). The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, "he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" (verse 5). Then Jesus finally arrives on the scene as the fulfillment of these ancient prophecies, and in His own ministry He continues to prophecy of His suffering. These three statements in Mark 8, 9, and 10 are like thundering drum beats as He is on His death march to Jerusalem.

We should see in this the centrality of the cross. Everything is pointing to Christ, and even more specifically to Christ on the cross. That is the central reality of the universe! That means if your life is not focused on that reality, then you are missing what life is all about. As sinful human beings we need to

realize the gravity of our sin, and the punishment that our sin deserves, which is an eternity in hell separated from God. That's the bad news that enables us to see how glorious the cross is, because on the cross Jesus took that punishment for us. And then He rose again in triumph over sin and death and the grave. The glorious news of the Gospel is that all who repent of their sin and trust in Christ will be forgiven. That's the glory of cross! Heaven rather than hell. God's favor rather than His wrath. That's why Paul writes in Galatians 6:14, "far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." That is the central event of history, and it's the event that we will be remembering the celebrating for all eternity, that our Savior died for us and rose again.

The second thing to think about in this statement is, Who delivered the Son of Man into the hands of men? Notice the passive form of the verb in verse 31. "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of the men, and they will kill him." Who's doing the delivering? We might say Judas, and that would be correct. But that's not the whole answer. The bigger answer, the ultimate cause, is God the Father. To quote from Isaiah 53 again, it says in verse 10, "it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief." We also have these amazing statements in the book of Acts that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), and that everything Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel did was according to God's plan which He had predestined to take place (Acts 4:27-28). It was God the Father, ultimately, who delivered Jesus into the hands of men to be killed. This was the eternal plan of God for redeeming sinful humanity. It wasn't a mistake that Jesus ended up on the cross. It wasn't that the bad guys won. It all happened according God's glorious plan of redemption. The Son of Man was delivered into the hands of men, and killed. And then He rose on the third day.

After Jesus stated these things, Mark 9:32 tells us that the disciples "did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him." You better believe they were afraid to ask, after Jesus' harsh rebuke of Peter in chapter 8. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (8:33). After a rebuke like that, you're going to be pretty slow to challenge what Jesus says. They're still confused, but they keep their mouths shut this time, at least initially.

But then they get into this prideful argument about who is the greatest, and then right after that John comes to Jesus with a complaint that is rooted in jealousy. There's one more interesting thing I'd like to point out about the disciples' confusion, and that is the confusion of the inner circle of disciples: Peter, James and

John. Mark records three times that Jesus foretold His death and resurrection. After the first, Peter rebuked Jesus (8:32). After the second, John brings this complaint to Jesus (9:38). And then after the third, in 10:35, James and John come to Jesus and make this audacious request, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And then they ask, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Do you see the pattern? Jesus says, “I’m going to suffer.” And how do the disciples respond? How does the inner circle of disciples respond? Peter rebukes Jesus. John complains about someone who is stealing some of their glory. And then James and John ask for an exalted status at the right and left hand of Jesus. What a stark contrast between Jesus’ message and their assumptions. Jesus has His face set toward the cross, and the disciples are thinking about crowns. Jesus is walking into suffering, and all they are thinking about is success. They don’t get it. And it’s not just one or two disciples who are kind of dense. It’s all of them! None of them get it. And Mark highlights that for us by recording these statements from the three most privileged disciples, the ones who saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain top. Peter, James and John do not yet understand what Jesus has come to do. They’re confused.

Pride (verses 33-37)

They are also proud, as we see in the next paragraph. I was trying to envision this journey, as they were on their way to Capernaum. Jesus must have been walking on ahead of them, and they were huddled around each other, speaking in hushed tones so that Jesus wouldn’t hear them, and they were arguing about who was the greatest. They must have had some sense that if Jesus heard them, He would have something to say to them that would be uncomfortable for them to hear. So they wanted to keep this to themselves. What didn’t occur to them was that Jesus didn’t have to be within earshot to know their hearts. Maybe Jesus didn’t hear with His ears the words that came out of their mouths, but He knew exactly what they said and He even knew the precise attitudes and motivations of their hearts. So here they are, they arrive in Capernaum, they go to the house, and most of them are probably still miffed at one another because of the conversation that was cut short upon their arrival. But they know to end their argument before entering the house with Jesus. Then Jesus says, “What were you discussing on the way?” It’s not so much a question as it is an indictment. They just hung their heads. They were ashamed. They said nothing. And then it must have been another one of those times of awe as they listened to Him address in detail the things they had just been arguing about that they

assumed He hadn't heard. And He did so in such a radical and counter-intuitive way. In verse 35 He said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." It sounds a lot like what Jesus said in chapter 8:34-35, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." It sounds paradoxical. It sounds contradictory. How can you be first if you're last? How can you be the greatest if you're a servant? Those things just don't go together, just like suffering and glory don't go together. Jesus is calling them, and us, to a radical re-appraisal of all of our worldly assumptions.

Jesus is defining true greatness. You think you know what it means to be great? You think you know what it means to be first? Jesus says, it's the exact opposite. You think greatness is having people serve you? You're wrong. True greatness is to serve others. You think greatness is to have the spotlight on you, to get all the attention, the applause, the praise? No. True greatness is to step to the back and direct the praise elsewhere.

Jesus is such a good teacher, and He seized upon a teachable moment here. He's correcting the disciples' false notions of greatness, and to give a vivid illustration of what He's saying to them He takes a child in His arms. What an awesome portrait of our Savior's love and kindness and compassion. He reaches out to those who are lowly in society, those who have no privilege, no position, no power, and He embraces them and helps them and loves them. He takes this child on His lap and says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." This is what discipleship is. This is what it looks like to receive Jesus, which is also receiving the Father. Being a disciple of Jesus is not about power and prestige. It's about humbling yourself to the place of a servant. It's about relinquishing the place of prominence at the front of the line and going to stand in the back of the line. It's about showing love towards those who will never be able to do anything for you in return. That's what Jesus is communicating as He sits there with a child in His arms.

Jesus modeled this again in such a profound way when He washed His disciples' feet (John 13). Imagine how shocking that would have been! It was so shocking, in fact, that Peter resisted. Jesus is first, not last. He's the Teacher, the Leader, the Great One. He's not a servant. But Jesus is redefining greatness for us, and He models true greatness.

In Mark 10, in a discussion very similar to what we're seeing here in Mark 9, Jesus repeats this teaching. Mark 10:42-45, "And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that

those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”” Jesus was the ultimate servant, and therefore He’s the essence of greatness. He not only washed feet, He sacrificed His very life as a ransom for others.

If we aspire to greatness, true greatness, this is what it will look like. Service to others, loving sacrifice for the good of others, humble help offered to those in need. This is true greatness.

In verses 33-37 we see the disciples’ pride and Jesus’ response to it.

Jealousy (verses 38-41)

Then in verses 38-41 we see the disciples’ jealousy and Jesus’ response to it. Jealousy, of course, is very closely related to pride. It’s an evidence of pride, one of the many ways that pride manifests itself. We feel entitled to certain things. We feel like we deserve certain things. And when we don’t have those things, and someone else does, we feel jealous of that person. For the disciples, their pride had just been severely wounded when they were unable to cast out the demon. That was in our passage for last week. There was a son who had a demon, and his father came looking for Jesus. But Jesus was up on the mountain. So the disciples tried to cast out the demon, but they couldn’t.

Now there’s this other guy who is casting out demons. And he’s doing it successfully, and he’s doing it in Jesus’ Name, but he’s not part of their group. Therefore the disciples tried to stop him. Don’t you wonder what that looked like? They tried to stop this guy from doing good for people by the power of Jesus. They tried to stop him. And the guy probably said, “What’s the problem.” These people are oppressed by evil forces, and I’m calling on the power of Jesus to set them free. What could be bad about that? And the disciples would have tried to explain themselves, “Yeah, well . . . uh, but you’re not one of us. I mean, you’re not part of our group.” And John was so proud of how they handled the situation that he comes back now to tell Jesus what a good thing they did.

Jesus blows up their assumptions yet again. His response is in verses 39-41, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.” Here’s the gist of what Jesus is saying to them, You’re not the only ones who can do

mighty works in my Name. The Kingdom is bigger than you. And in the midst of all the opposition that we're facing, we need to recognize that those who are not foes are friends. So don't try to stop people from doing mighty works in my Name. Instead, welcome them as friends and gladly receive their assistance, whether it be a cup of water to drink in the midst of your persecution, or whether it be mighty works like casting out demons. That's how Jesus corrects the jealous mindset of the disciples. They think they have the exclusive rights to the work of the Kingdom. If anything great is going to happen, it has to go through them. But Jesus says, that's definitely not the case.

In our last few minutes I want to draw out some application points that relate to both pride and jealousy. The disciples were proud, arguing about who was the greatest. And they were jealous of the success that someone else had. We need to think about how this same kind of pride and this same kind of jealousy is present in our own lives. God needs to expose these things so that we can see them and then fight against them. We want to combat pride and jealousy and, by God's grace, foster humility and contentment in our lives.

Let me mention five areas where this struggle may be evident. My hope as I talk about these is that it will help each of us identify ways that pride or jealousy are at work and how we can strive to be servants and team-players. We shouldn't be the ones who are drawing attention to ourselves, saying, I'm the greatest. And we shouldn't be the ones who are trying to stifle and discredit everyone else because of our jealousy. Instead, if we want to attain true greatness, we should desire to be servant of all, and we should rejoice at the mighty works of God even if those mighty works are not happening through "us"—however we define "us."

A couple of these will relate more to women, and a couple of them will relate more to men.

Hospitality

The first is hospitality. This is a way to serve others. You can go to a restaurant and be served. You can have servants waiting on you hand and foot. And many would think of that as greatness. But to be hospitable is to become a servant, to minister to the needs of others, to welcome people into your home and seek to edify them. And lest you think that hospitality requires a Masters degree in culinary arts and interior decorating, listen to this definition of hospitality that contrasts it with entertaining. This is from a document that my friend John Kimbell put together (pastor at Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, KY), and it's part of their small group leaders training. This is what it says about the heart of hospitality: "Hospitality is not the same as entertaining.

Entertaining in your home seeks to impress others, whereas hospitality seeks to serve others. Entertaining is focused on things, whereas hospitality is focused on people. Entertaining is concerned with what your guests think of you, whereas hospitality is concerned with the welfare of your guests, desiring to provide them comfort and edification.” So you don’t have to have an immaculate house. You don’t have to have gourmet food. You just have to have a servant’s heart and a desire for edifying fellowship. I hope that we as a church body will become more and more hospitable, welcoming people into this fellowship, having one another in our homes, having unbelievers in our homes, and all with a desire to serve and edify. Not trying to impress each other, not feeling jealous of one another, but serving one another and building one another up.

The Workplace

Another area of life that we can think about is the workplace. How can you become a servant at your job? Your initial thought might be, Well, that just doesn’t happen where I work. Anyone who’s a servant gets left at the bottom of the ladder. I have to be stepping on people’s heads if I want to get to the top. It’s cutthroat.

I think this passage has something to say about that. I don’t think Jesus is saying you shouldn’t pursue promotions or that you can’t have any position of power or authority. But I do think this command is for all of us, and therefore I believe that we should strive to be servants wherever God places us. So think about that as you go to work tomorrow. How can you serve the people you work with—those above you and those below you? Whether you pursue this or not will depend on how you define greatness.

Modesty

A third application point has to do with modesty. Listen to what C. J. Mahaney writes about this. “Modesty means propriety. It means avoiding clothes and adornment that are extravagant or sexually enticing. Modesty is humility expressed in dress. It’s a desire to serve others, particularly men, by not promoting or provoking sensuality. Immodesty, then, is much more than wearing a short skirt or low-cut top; it’s the act of drawing undue attention to yourself. It’s pride, on display by what you wear.”¹ Do you want to be a servant? Do you want to be humble? Do you want to be truly great? Then think about what you wear.

¹ C. J. Mahaney, *Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World*, 120.

In the Home

A fourth area to consider is the home. Is it your daily struggle to try to manipulate things in your home so that your desires are met and you get all the things you want? Is that the greatness you're striving for? Or are you putting others first, wanting to serve and help and encourage? Husbands, do you finish a hard day's work and come home expecting to be served? Or do you head home planning to be a servant-leader as we're instructed in Ephesians 5 to emulate Christ's sacrificial leadership of the church?

The other night at dinner our family was joking about what a good argument would be. The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. But what if we argued about who would have the privilege of washing the dishes after dinner. "I'll do the dishes." "No, let me do the dishes." Or changing the dirty diaper, or whatever it might be in your house. It's a beautiful thing when husband, wife and kids are all wanting to serve. That's a happy place to be.

Ministry

Finally, we should think about the realm of Christian ministry, for this is most closely related to the situation in Mark 9. And this ministered to me this week and convicted me because I can see the pride in my heart that desires the praise of men and manifests itself in jealousy of others whom God is blessing. It was convicting to see that that's precisely the attitude that Jesus rebukes in these verses. Don't desire to be great in the eyes of men. Don't be jealous when God uses someone else to advance the Kingdom. Be humble. Be content. Be a servant wherever it is that God has placed you. This has been wonderfully encouraging to me as I've meditated on this passage.

How about you? Can you rejoice when God blesses others or when God uses others to do something great for the Kingdom? Does that make you glad, or jealous? Do you have a competitive spirit when it comes to ministry? That's a dangerous and destructive thing that we should beware of.

I'll close with this illustration, which I just read in a book by Richard Phillips. He recounts this story. "The gifted preacher F. B. Meyer struggled with envy. God called him to serve in London at the same time as Charles Haddon Spurgeon, arguably the greatest preacher who ever lived. So, despite his ability and hard work, Meyer would stand outside his church and watch the carriages flow by to Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle. Later in life, it happened again, as G. Campbell Morgan eclipsed Meyer's success. When they spoke together at conferences, vast crowds listened to Morgan, then left when Meyer was to preach.

Convicted over his bitter spirit, Meyer committed himself to pray for Morgan, reasoning that the Holy Spirit would not allow him to envy a man for whom he prayed. He was right. God enabled Meyer to rejoice in Morgan's preaching. People heard him saying: 'Have you heard Campbell Morgan preach? Did you hear that message this morning? My, God is upon that man!' In response to Meyer's prayers, Morgan's church so overflowed that people came and filled Meyer's church, too."²

That's a great lesson for us. Is there someone you're jealous of? Pray for that person. Remember that it's not about you. It's not about who gets the credit or who gets the recognition or who gets the pat on the back. Let's not pursue greatness as the world defines it. To be humble and content and to be servant of all. That is true greatness.

² Richard Phillips, *The Masculine Mandate*, 148.