

**Mark:
I Am the Greatest**

Mark 9:30-37

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Now turn with me, if you would, in the Gospel of Mark, and we're going to read from the ninth chapter, but after that we're also going to read a portion from I Corinthians, chapter four, so if you want to have I Corinthians 4 also open, we'll be turning immediately to that.

First of all, in the Gospel of Mark, and in chapter nine...and before we read Scripture together, let's look to God once again in prayer.

O Lord, our God, we bow on this Lord's Day evening as a needy people. Once again we come before You hungry: hungry for Your word. Feed us, we pray. And grant now by the illumination of Your Spirit that we might read, learn, mark, and inwardly digest for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Mark, chapter nine, and beginning at verse 33:

They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, 'What were you discussing on the way?' But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. And sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, 'If any one wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.' And taking a child, He set him before them; and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 'Whoever receives one child like this in My name is receiving me; and whoever receives Me is not receiving me, but Him who sent Me.'

And then turn over to I Corinthians, chapter four, and we'll read from verse 8 through verse 13; and the apostle is now reflecting a little on the nature of service and servanthood. He's speaking to the Corinthians, and often when Paul is speaking to the Corinthians there's a note of sarcasm in his voice, I think. They pretended to be what they weren't, and so he begins:

You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you." [You hear the sarcasm in his voice.] "For I think

God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

I wonder what you might suggest if I were to ask you this evening, "What is the chief mark of Christian discipleship? What shape does it take? What notes does it sound?"

Now looking around at some of the best-selling Christian books, you might be forgiven if you were to read their titles, or perhaps listen for a few minutes to some of our famous TV evangelists. The answer might seem to be 'success,' or 'prosperity'; 'resourcefulness', 'achieving greatness by tapping into that inner potential that needs unlocking'...something like that.

On British television and radio last year there was a very interesting nationwide attempt to identify the ten greatest Britons of all time. People were encouraged to vote, to send them in by mail or to use the internet. It was a lengthy process, and apparently took four or five months. It began with several hundred names, as you might expect, and it was finally whittled down to ten. And then voting began in earnest. It was a very interesting list of ten people. Who, you might think?

It was interesting that Paul McCartney wasn't there, but John Lennon was. It astonished some that Princess Diana, Princess of Wales, was there. Prince Charles was not. The final list included such names as, in the tenth place, Oliver Cromwell; Lord Nelson; Elizabeth...the First, that is...not Elizabeth II, not the current queen, but the sixteenth century monarch, Elizabeth I; John Lennon; John Newton; Shakespeare; Darwin; Diana, the Princess of Wales. In the second place, Isambard Kingdom Brunel,¹ which all of you engineers will know—the great bridge-builder, and built some ships...some very famous ships, and did some astonishing work on the railways—probably unknown to most of you, but he was second.

But who was first, the greatest Briton of all time? And as you might have guessed, it was Winston Churchill.

¹ http://www.greatbuildings.com/architects/Isambard_Kingdom_Brunel.html
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RAbrunel.htm>
<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/b.gardner/brunel/kingbrun.html>

What was more interesting were the criteria employed in choosing somebody of greatness. Where does greatness consist in? These disciples have been talking about greatness. They've come to a house, and Jesus has begun to inquire of them. And apparently they'd been discussing who of them, which one of them, is the greatest. They had great claims, of course. Peter and James and John could write of their experience on the mount of transfiguration, and publish a book called "Mountaintop Experiences with Jesus". Several of them could allude their former hum-drum lives, and contrast that with what they were now: "From Fishermen to Apostles: the Secret of Success", or "Leadership Skills of Those Who Have Made It to the Top." Peter could allude to Caesarea Philippi, how Jesus, you remember, had called him "The Rock." "How to Be Number One", by Rocky.....Judas—he could publish a book and call it "Investing for Eternity: How God Doesn't Want You to be Poor." Or, "Nobody Remembers Who Came Second." You get my drift.

The disciples are in Capernaum, this charming little town, city, on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee. It's where Jesus often went. He often went there to the synagogue. He stayed there on many an occasions, probably in Peter's house, and the text suggests here that they're in "the" house—suggesting, probably, that this is Peter's house that they're in. They're having some down time. They'd been on an extraordinary journey up north, to the mount of transfiguration, and many other acts of ministry on the way back.

And now they're sitting in this house, drinking coffee. And Jesus asks them, what were they talking about on the way back? You can imagine the scene: the disciples are talking to each other, and perhaps Jesus is hanging back a little, allowing them to engage in their frenetic discourse, and they keep silent now, because they're ashamed. They don't want to let Jesus know what it is they'd been talking about.

And Mark tells us, and you understand, it's probably Peter who's dictating this to Mark; according to tradition, the Gospel of Mark was written with Peter looking over his shoulder, and perhaps Peter says, 'Do you know what we were talking about? We were asking which one was the greatest.' It's going to return again in the next chapter, in chapter ten. James and John are going to ask Jesus a small little favor: that they can sit one on the left and the other on the right when Jesus comes in His kingdom. Evidently they didn't get the instruction that Jesus is about to give.

It's almost embarrassing, isn't it, to think about this? You wouldn't want to be caught...you wouldn't want Jesus to overhear this conversation, if you were engaged in a conversation as to "Which one of you is more important as a Christian?" Or, "Which one of you is more important to this church," or, "Which one of you is more important to the kingdom?" You wouldn't want Jesus to overhear that conversation. After all, doesn't the gospel tell us that there is

neither Greek nor Jew, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female? That we're all one in Jesus Christ? 'Ah, but,' you say, 'that applies to the basis of our acceptance in Jesus Christ. We're all of us justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. We're all sinners, every single one of us, and the basis of our acceptance in the gospel is the same, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, no matter what your background—whether you're a prince or a pauper.'

But there are differences between us. There most certainly are. Some are immature, and some are mature. We make those judgments. We discern folk that we think are godly, and folk that we think need more godliness. Some have one talent, and others have ten talents. Some are distinguished, so that when it comes to officer elections, for example, at least in theory we choose those with imminent gifts and imminent godliness, not a novice. So there is a concept of greatness in the kingdom of God.

But what shape does that greatness take? Is it possible to speak, and more importantly, is it possible to recognize greatness? Jesus says two things—well, He does two things. He first of all speaks, and He gives them a principle, and then He illustrates the principle.

1. Jesus instructs the disciples on being a servant.

The first thing He does is that He instructs them. They're sitting down in this house, and it's a private setting now, and He gives them this instruction. It's a principle, a principle of growing downwards in order to find greatness. He sits them down and He says to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." It's an astonishing statement, isn't it? We don't teach our children that. We want them to play to win—isn't that what we say to our children? We don't want them to be half-hearted; we want them to go out there to win. Oh, forget about the importance of teamwork....

It was interesting...and don't get bent out of shape now, but it was interesting last year reading the press coverage of the American Ryder Cup, and the failure to win the Ryder Cup. And apparently the press were fairly unanimous that these great professional golfers didn't know how to play as a team. They were all playing for themselves. They were all out for Number One. Well, the disciples are talking here about greatness.

These are not your run-of-the-mill Christians here—these are the disciples. These are the twelve disciples; these are the hand-picked disciples of Jesus. We're at a significant moment in the ministry of Jesus. They'd been in His presence for...well, some considerable time—perhaps eighteen months, perhaps a little more. They've heard many, many hours and hours and hours of instruction from Jesus. They've watched Him. They've taken notes of how He has responded to every conceivable circumstance and situation. They've been involved in acts of

ministry, and of performing miracles. And Jesus is saying to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

It is a little reminiscent, isn't it, of the words of John the Baptist? When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, "He must become greater, and I must become less." Pride in place: it inflates like a balloon. But grace punctures that balloon, and lets that hot, proud air out of our system. What does Jesus mean, that you must be ready to be last in line? That you must be ready to be a servant? (Actually, the word that He uses is "a deacon.") You must be ready to have a servant heart. What does He mean?

Well, that's why I wanted us to look at this remarkable passage in I Corinthians 4, because I think Paul answers that question for us. He's talking to the Corinthians. The Corinthians were proud—they were arrogant, they were conceited. God had given to them extraordinary gifts. The church was in a mess. They had all kinds of popularity contests. They knew all about greatness. They could measure greatness. They'd had their "ten great apostles' contest in Corinth, and some of them had come up with the answer that the greatest apostle was Apollos, and others had come up with the answer that the greatest apostle was Paul, and others had come up with the answer that the greatest apostle was Peter. And there were spiritual types who said that the greatest one of all was Jesus—and there was no touching them.

And you notice what Paul says to these Corinthians, because now it seems as though Paul especially is in disfavor in Corinth. He's having a hard time to make his point of view known. He says in the beginning of chapter 3, "I don't address you as spiritual"; and especially in verse 9 [chapter 4]: "For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we've become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men."

Do you see what he's doing? He's using an analogy that would have been very familiar to the Corinthians; an analogy of a victorious Roman army coming back to Rome after a great battle, and there was a certain staged processional entrance into the city. First of all would come the generals, then the commanders, and the men who had distinguished themselves with great acts of heroism; and there would be cheers and adulation, and wreathes would be thrown, and the crowd would shout in unison "All hail!" And then would come the troops and you'd look for your father or your son, and you'd shout welcomes and hurrahs, and you'd throw bunches of flowers at these soldiers returning in great conquest from their battle. And then would come the prisoners, those who had been taken captive; and the leaders of the defeated nations, and they'd be in chains, and they would be bedraggled; and right at the end, condemned men—and they're on their way to the arena, the amphitheater, with the gladiators, and they would be thrown to the beasts. Demoralized men, covered in dirt...all kinds of things have been thrown at them along the way, and dogs perhaps had been set on them, and they're bleeding.

And do you see what Paul is saying to the Corinthians? 'That's us. Those condemned men at the end of the line, that's us.' In Corinth they had their super-apostles, but they didn't look anything like that. They were first in line; their names were up in neon lights. And Paul is saying, 'No, that's not the measure of greatness in the kingdom of God. We are heading for our deaths.'

Isn't that what we were thinking about this morning? Astonishing sort of parallel, isn't there, between this passage and the passage this morning, when Paul writes his final words to Timothy? And he says to Timothy, 'Don't be ashamed of the gospel, and don't be ashamed of us...of me...in prison. We are apostles. We are the apostles of Jesus Christ, but we're shuffling along the road at the end of the procession, and we are condemned men.' That's what he's saying in verse 9: 'God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death, because we've become a spectacle to the world.'

What's the measure of greatness? What does a great Christian look like? And I think Jesus portrayed it, didn't He, in the upper room, when the disciples went to celebrate Passover? And Jesus divested Himself of His outer garments and did something which only a lowly servant would do, because none of the other disciples did it. It never occurred to them that they would do this act of washing the disciples' feet. Jesus did that. The Son of God did that. The Lord of glory did that. Yahweh incarnate did that! He washed the feet of disciples. You remember what He said: 'I gave you an example that you should do as I did to you. I gave you an example, an example of greatness, of overwhelming greatness.'

Isn't that what Paul says in Philippians 2?

"Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but He made Himself of no reputation."

He made Himself of no reputation. He didn't stand upon His dignity; He didn't demand His rights everywhere that He went. "He was found in fashion as a man, in the form of a servant." And He gave Himself, and He gave himself away on behalf of sinners like you and me. That's the principle that Jesus is giving here: "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all."

2. And then He illustrates the principle.

He takes a little boy, stands this little boy in the midst of the disciples, and then He embraces that little boy. Now, you have to understand something of the culture—the culture in which Jesus is saying this and doing this, because in a culture where infant mortality was very high, and where boys were valued above girls, and their worth was measured in their ability to work and earn some money

and bring it home to the household, infants were not valued. They were not valued. He'll say something very similar to this again, in chapter 10: that "the kingdom of God," he will say, "belongs to such as these"... these little children. Now Jesus puts His arms around this little boy. Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms He said to them, "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me."

Now don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying here. It's often interpreted as though Jesus were saying, 'I want you to become like a little child.' That the measure of greatness is, you become like a little child; you become humble like a little child. Well, I can only think that people who think that little children are humble are either bachelors or absentee fathers, or suffering from some kind of selective amnesia! Because little children are not, by nature and temperament, humble.

Wasn't Samuel teaching the children this evening what the effects of being in union with Adam are? And one of the things that he said was that it's the "me-culture" that's instinctive: me, me, me, me...me first! You don't have to teach children that.

But Jesus isn't saying to the disciples, 'You must become like a little child.' No! What Jesus is saying is, 'You must become like Me, who embraces little children...little children who are regarded as worthless...little children of no great value...little children who are not going to write you great "thank you" notes for all the ministry that you do to them. They're not going to applaud you. Little children expect you to do these things for them, and they're not always grateful when you do them.

And Jesus takes this little boy and He hugs this little boy. Now, don't get all mushy here! Because Jesus didn't go about doing that; He didn't, really. But here, He's teaching the disciples a valuable lesson: that the measure of greatness and the measure of servanthood...a servant's heart is a willingness to engage in ministry, for those to whom you minister are not going to thank you for it.

I wonder tonight if I can speak to the interns, just for a second. And you know, you have to do this job. And I've heard you, and I've got some measure of sympathy, because I've never been asked to do it. And you speak to the little children...and I wonder if it has ever occurred to you that 'This is beneath me. You know, I'm a seminary student, after all. You know, I'm here to do bigger things and greater things than talk to little children.' And Jesus is saying...and do you hear Him?...that there is no greater act of service, that there is no greater demonstration of a servant's heart than to speak to little children who are not thankful, who are not grateful. They don't send you those large checks in gratitude for all the things that you've done for them. And they may not even listen to you, and they may even be a little naughty when you're speaking to

them, but I wonder...I wonder if I can ask the interns that question tonight. You want to be great; you want to be useful. Then listen to Jesus. And Jesus says, 'Be like Me. Be like Me. Have a heart like My heart, and embrace these little children. Embrace these little children.'

Why does Jesus bring these little children in here? And it's precisely that, isn't it? It's not just children; He's not just saying, you understand, that a servant's heart is somebody who ministers to children. Now, He certainly says that.

We just bid farewell to a fond and wonderful member of staff here, and you remember her because of her work with children. She loved children. I can't think of her now without thinking of children. And she was surrounded by children, and her entire life was devoted to ministering to children. She had a servant's heart; she had a Jesus-like heart.

But Jesus isn't just saying that. He's not saying that the most servant-like hearts of all are those who minister to children as such. You know this is just an illustration. It's ministry to those who won't pay back that ministry.

When somebody comes into the church and they've got problems—you know, churches attract people with problems...they do...the disenfranchised, the rejects of society, ones who can't find attention anywhere else...they come to church. Of course they do! And I wonder what we do, you and I. We say we love the Lord. We say our sins are forgiven. We want to be servants in the name of Jesus. And somebody comes in, and they're not a doctor, they're not a lawyer; they're not going to write that \$50,000 check. More than likely they're going to need funds. They're going to need support. They're going to need your time, they're going to need your prayers, they're going to need your attention. And what do we do? And we walk the long way round. I'm talking about myself now. And we avoid them, and we say to ourselves, 'Oh, no! I definitely don't want to have anything to do with that person!'

James talks about this. Doesn't James talk about this very issue? The poor, the disenfranchised, the rejects of society, and they come into church, and what do you do? Do you remember what James says is the measure of true religion? What is the measure of true religion? What is the measure of true greatness? What is the measure of service that's valuable in the kingdom of God? "Ministry to the widows, and to the orphans." And again, in the context of first century, they were people of great need, of enormous need. They're going to involve your time and your efforts, and your heart.

Look around you, my friends. What is the church saying tonight? And I don't mean just First Presbyterian Church...but I certainly mean First Presbyterian Church, but I mean the church, generally. What is the church saying about what great models of discipleship look like? Mouthy sports personalities whose advocacy of Christianity is superficial and nominal at best, and suggests that if

you follow Jesus, at least occasionally, you'll become a multi-million dollar sportsman just like myself? And it's a million miles away from what Jesus is saying here.

You want to know what true greatness looks like? It's somebody who gives, and gives, and gives, and doesn't expect anything by way of return—only the praise of his Savior and his Master whispering in his ear, “Well, done, thou good and faithful servant.”

Allow me to speak, will you, once again to those who are your staff here in the church—and I include myself. And we so often find ourselves complaining that we're not appreciated, or we're not loved, or we're not rewarded in the way that we expect to be rewarded. We're not given the deference, we're not given the place, we're not honored in the way that we're honored.

And do you hear, my friends, what Jesus is saying? If you want to be great, then go to the last of the line. Go to the end of the line. And Jesus is saying, ‘Here's the measure of true greatness: you give, and you give, and you give again without any thought—any thought—that they're going to pay you back.’

And that's the heart of Jesus. That's the heart of Jesus. We can never pay Him back. We can never pay back what Jesus has done for us. Have that kind of heart, Jesus is saying.

Let's pray together.

Our God and our Father, as we draw to a close this Lord's Day evening, and as Your word has had its way with us, we pray, Holy Spirit, that You might continue now to write this word upon our hearts. Bless us in the rest of this day, to enjoy Your presence and Your words, and the fellowship of one another and our families, and those things which You have given to us in Your goodness which make life so wonderful and pleasing. And bless us, we pray, as we engage in the trials and the obstacles of this world; and help us to take up our cross and to follow after Jesus Christ. And give us, we pray, a servant's heart, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Amen.

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