



Speaker:
Paul Forrest

True Greatness

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 31 of 31

1/10/2021 (SUN) | Bible: **Mark 9:30-37**

And they departed thence and passed through Galilee, and he would not that any man should know it. For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, “The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day.” But they understood not that saying and were afraid to ask him.

And he came to Capernaum. And being in the house he asked them, “What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?” But they held their peace, for by the way they had disputed among themselves who should be the greatest.

And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, “If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all.” And he took a child and set him in the midst of them. And when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, “Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.”

Last time, we looked at the issue of unbelief. We considered unbelief in atheists, in those who believe in God, and even in the church of God itself. And we encouraged ourselves with the scriptures to fight against unbelief and beg God that he would build us up in the faith.

Jesus, with his disciples, is moving on now. He's now approaching his final route. The disciples follow him as he makes his way south to Jerusalem for his appointment with death. Jesus determines now the disciples need to be instructed once again in the purpose of his mission. They'd previously not fully grasped his predictions of his death and resurrection, and their Jewish ideas of the coming Messiah were proving difficult to remove.

Note how Mark puts this. They were afraid to ask Jesus for clarification. It could be they knew what the answer would be and didn't want to hear it. I wonder also whether they were thinking about how strongly Jesus had rebuked Peter and didn't want to suffer the same humiliation. Matthew tells us they were sad. I expect they were sad about the death bit but confused about talk of the resurrection.

Anyway, these men were to become the foundations of that great building of God called the New Testament Church. You may well marvel that such a bunch could be used by Jesus in this way. We've seen their childishness in understanding, their lack of prayer, and today we witness their sinful desire for self-glorification.

They needed a proper, sit down talk with Jesus, without any of the distractions of other people. It's for this reason Jesus takes the route he does, bypassing the towns on the route.

Having seen signs of sin and confusion in their conversations on their travels, his plan is to go into a house where he can instruct them.

The theme in this passage is about what true greatness is. We will see how and why the disciples misunderstood what true greatness was. We'll carefully hear Jesus's teaching about greatness, see how he became a great example of servanthood, and hopefully get an idea of how we can better serve God and others ourselves.

True greatness misunderstood

It seems Jesus was walking separately from the disciples on the journey. They had a conversation he wasn't part of. And it was all about rank. Who was the most important.

It's quite easy to see why this conversation would have begun. Think about how we saw Jesus take just three disciples up the mountain to witness his transfiguration. They had this great privilege of seeing Jesus in a state never seen and never again to be seen by men in this world. Meanwhile, the remaining nine disciples were dejected. They'd failed to drive out an evil spirit from a man. They'd been humiliated, and the experience of the other three disciples would only magnify the feeling.

We can only imagine how their conversation went on this journey South.

- Perhaps Andrew was arguing for being high up in the ranking because he was one of the first disciples chosen by Jesus.
- James might have argued he was more important as one of the only three to see the transfiguration.
- Peter may have claimed to be at the top of the hierarchy because he was their main spokesman, and he made that famous confession about Jesus being the true Messiah.
- And John, the one acutely aware of Jesus's love, who wrote so much of the New Testament, wouldn't have been shy in promoting himself, and we'll see him later ask Jesus for the highest of positions in glory.

What's astounding is that so soon after Jesus has announced his death they should be squabbling about rank!

Jesus here asks them what they were talking about. This time, he knows it already. We've seen that sometimes he employs his divine power to read people's hearts, while on other occasions he gets information from others. For example, he may have overheard some of their conversation on the journey and worked out what the disagreement was all about.

The disciples didn't answer. Probably because they knew their ambitions were sinful.

Some readers of the scriptures have wondered why a gang of grown men would be talking about who was the most important. It seems so utterly childish. We need to understand their thinking was consistent with Judaism in general. For example, Rabbinical writings often talk about the seating arrangements in Paradise, where those who keep the Law more strictly will sit nearer to the throne of God. In preparation for that time to come, they

included these sorts of arrangements in everyday life. Whether it was seating plans at meals, or their general attitude of inferiority and superiority, they thought it quite fair to start practicing now what would be the arrangements for all eternity.

In addition to this, the whole Greek world thought in a similar way. Plato, regarded as one of their greatest thinkers said, “How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?” Their society had clear ideas about service and servants.

The truth is friends, **all conversation about being the greatest or most important are completely irrelevant in the church of God.** They showed nothing but the depravity of the human soul. Listen to what the prophet says about such people. **Isaiah 2:12—“For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low.”**

Our world today is thoroughly affected by this idea of status. People categorise themselves and others. They rank each other by status. Generally, people want to climb the status ladder and become important. People don't celebrate a job promotion because it gives them more opportunity to serve; their joy comes from the increased status! The greater income will merely allow them to live a life which shows their increased status to others.

Sadly, Christians are not immune from this type of behaviour. When God saves us, he forgives all our sin, past, present, and future. But he doesn't remove all our sinful baggage in terms of our behaviour. That's a lifelong project and is never completed. It's a sobering thought to know our last day on this earth will be accompanied by sinful thoughts, words, or actions. We won't stop till we die.

One aspect of this baggage which Christians find difficult to discard is this habit of seeking greater status for themselves and viewing others in the church according to *their* social status. Believers will speak highly of fellow Christians who have been “successful”, by which they mean they've made plenty of money, got a nice house and drive round in a nice car. They tend not to speak glowingly about that middle age woman who's a cleaner in the local hospital.

And this mindset of status even affects the structures within the church itself. We put preachers on pedestals. Christians think themselves greatly honoured when a famous preacher is in their company, while they think far less of the one *God himself has chosen* to minister to them week by week. If you say it's human nature, you'd be right of course. If you said it's *only natural*, you make light of an attitude that's sinful. When believers seek greater status for themselves or their children, or they bring this poisonous attitude into the church, they're no better than the disciples in this account they so look down on.

True greatness explained

We see Jesus sit down now, taking a position of a teacher. He calls the disciples to come near and listen to him. There are other people in this house, including at least one child. He calls a child over to him. Let's say his name was “Jacob”. *Jacob, would you come over here a minute please?* And the child now takes a central place in this lesson.

It's important we understand *why* Jesus used a child in the way he did. A cursory glance at these verses might leave you with the impression Jesus was instructing the disciples to be childlike. Now we are to be like children in many ways, but that's not what's being taught here.

To understand why Jesus used a child, we need to be aware of the status of children in that society. In the ancient world, children were largely ignored. Even here in Palestine, a place more civilized than anywhere in the world, children held the lowest status in the family. It would be wrong of us to assume children in that society were regarded in the same way as in our own. I don't need to tell you that the pendulum may have swung too far the other way in our own society. In the modern-day, children are often allowed to behave however they want to. But whatever you think, the Bible describes a society where children have more of a say than they should as a cursed one.

In the Greek and Jewish world, children were most definitely to be seen and not heard! We tend to speak a lot about how beautiful, or clever, or wise, or artistic, our children or grandchildren are. Not so here. Children were effectively nobodies in the society Jesus lived in. And we're not to have think Jesus was intending to elevate their status to what they have in our society today. **His intention was to use an example of these nobodies and show why believers should treat nobodies...as somebodies!**

I'm sure you know just how much Jesus's teachings overturned conventional thinking. Here, he was forcing the disciples to consider welcoming into their company the most despised in society. And neither was Jesus here teaching the disciples to go and find the most miserable, or poor, or least able-bodied people in society and pay more attention to them than everyone else. That obligation is there, but it's a relatively minor one and isn't what Jesus is teaching here.

Hopefully, the disciples understood what he meant. If Jesus is taking the lowest in society as an example of one to be welcomed the most, he destroys the entire notion of status as they understood it. *All your deeply held ideas about status*, he tells them, *are meaningless.*

This idea of welcoming is worth taking notice of. When we welcome someone into our homes say, it's natural to feel honoured if that person is of a high status as we see it. It boosts our pride, because we think their presence reflects on us. We're excited at the prospect of telling others about the visit of this VIP, because we think it'll increase our status in the eyes of others.

The teaching is astounding because it says that, whenever we take an interest in, or pay regards to, the least esteemed in the church of God, *we are effectively welcoming God himself.* When you and I overturn our prejudices about status, and we learn to covet the fellowship even of those of low estate, we welcome Jesus! And in welcoming Jesus, **we welcome God.**

True greatness, then, is to be found in service, right down to the so-called least in the church.

I noticed that the Greek word translated “servant” is *diakonos*. It speaks of someone serving gladly, and it's where we get our word “deacon” from. Greatness in God's kingdom is determined, not by status, but by *service*.

The world, as you know, has ambitions different from what the Christian has (or should have).

- Where they have ambitions for status, we're to have low self-esteem.
- Where they spend their lives seeking wealth, we're to covet spiritual riches.
- And where they by nature seek after more power, the disciple of Jesus looks for ways to serve others.

So Jesus isn't trying to do away with the idea of greatness; he's redefining what greatness is! **The challenge to us is to be great in those things that matter to God.** He likes to see us give to his other children, and there's no position that gives us more opportunity to give than that of a servant in his church.

We might say that Jesus wants us to be great. We could go further and say he wants us to be the greatest in all the world! But in the high and mysterious logic of God, **we reach this elevated position by putting everyone else in the church before us.**

True greatness exemplified

Our reading contains the second example of Jesus predicting his death. A subtle difference in this prediction is the word “delivered”. He is to be *handed over* to his enemies. And it stuns us when we realise the one who would hand him over to the authorities was one of the people standing there being taught by him!

I've mentioned this phrase “son of man” before. I brought to your attention Jesus beginning to use this title of himself. You may remember I said the title speaks of Jesus's sufferings, but also his enthronement and rule. In Revelation, we saw a description of Jesus which casts the reader's mind back to the book of Daniel, with the figure of a man with hair like wool and white clothing.

How this term “son of man” is so powerful in our passage today is its literary use. Notice how Jesus uses the phrase “son of man” and “the hands of men” in the same sentence. It was meant to startle the hearer. He reminds them of his humanity with the phrase “son of man”, then goes on to talk about his being delivered into the hands OF men.

Philippians 2: 7,8 says, “But [he] made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in fashion as a man he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” Jesus taught servanthood by example, not by words alone.

Jesus teaches us today to serve others, most especially those of the household of faith. He teaches us to esteem and serve them. And in going to Calvary and dying in the place of sinners, he leaves us with an example of servanthood above all others. He put the entire multitude of believers in all ages before himself. In his amazing grace, he created a way to be both the greatest among us and the least among us.

So how can we follow his example of service?

Firstly, and most obviously, we are to serve God himself. We're to search the scriptures for instruction. We're to pay attention to the word preached, and whatever is clearly Biblical we obey.

Secondly, and which is the emphasis in Jesus's teaching here, there's serving others. We put our brothers and sisters in Christ first.

- We allow ourselves to be inconvenienced **for them**
- We don't hesitate to lose out financially **for their benefit**
- We're prepared to have less time to pursue our own interests in order that we might spend our time **servicing them**.

Specifically, what should we be doing?

- Well, we're to speak to our brethren. They may need to talk about mundane things that need to be dealt with. It could be finances or health issues, for example. And of course we speak to them about spiritual things too.
- We encourage them to keep going in the race set before them.
- We keep our eyes open so we can spot their needs, or even ask them outright.
- We open our homes to them and show them Christian hospitality.

I'll close with this. You should all fully consider yourselves as fellow labourers with me in the gospel. I won't lie to you and pretend in the past I've never had ambitions for status in the church of God. It's painful to admit, but I've coveted after the status of those preachers who receive such praise from the worldwide church. But as far as I can examine my own heart today, the only greatness I aspire to now is to serve you, my brethren in Jesus Christ.

You must pray for me, frequently. You must pray for yourselves and others, but I encourage you to daily remember me in your prayers. Pray to God that I'd never cease to tremble each week as I serve in the ministry of the word. Please do petition God on my behalf, that as I dish out his word, I might do it zealously and with a servant spirit.

I pray for you each day, and I trust that God will bless you all in the year ahead. I can't wait to see what he has planned for us all.

Amen.