

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SERIES TITLE: MARK 9:30-42 | SERMON TITLE: BEST OF THE BESTEST

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Bombing the Interview

Have you ever had a job interview where you tried to lose the job? So when they asked about your greatest strength you said you had none? When they ask about your greatest weakness you go on for ten minutes. You make sure to tell them about those two jobs you were fired from. You happen to mention that time when money went missing from work and you were the most likely suspect.

Now if anyone here has had an interview like that, I would be surprised. The fact is we don't handle job interviews like that. Instead, we put our best foot forward. We work to promote ourselves, to convince the interviewer we are a candidate they can't pass up. We are bold, we assert ourselves. We demonstrate confidence and we highlight our skills and experience. If we talk about our weakness we spin it to make it look like an asset after all: "Well, my greatest weakness is that I'm just too committed to working hard and pleasing my employer."

We promote ourselves. We seek advancement and position. We are ambitious. Now is there something wrong with that? It depends on our motivation and our means. The center of today's story is an ambition which is certainly not okay. It's motivation and means are all wrong. Today we look at the proud ambition of the 12.

The Proud Ambition of the 12

First let's figure out what I mean by proud ambition. What are the 12 doing? They are competing with one another for the highest position in the group. They know Jesus is somebody special and they want to get as close to him as possible so as to get into the limelight. They are ambitious for status. They want to be better than the guy standing next to them.

We'll see later in Mark that they want to sit on Jesus' right and left hand in the kingdom. They want to be recognized as especially important in God's economy. They want to be the best of the best. It's not enough to be in Jesus' inner ring; they want to be at the center of the inner ring.

Remember Jesus warned about the scribes who walk around in long robes and seek the best seats in synagogue and at dinner parties? They offer long prayers so people will think well of them. They lengthen their tassels and broaden their phylacteries. Well, right now the 12 are not faring much better than the scribes.

The 12 want to be proud of their position. They want to possess status. They want everyone to be star-struck when the 12 walk by. Soon they'll have a little table set up where they can sign autographs and promote their new book.

Perhaps what the 12 fear is that they should fail to become important Christians. Heaven forbid they should forever remain unknown and insignificant Christians. Heaven forbid they should find themselves to be among what Jesus calls "the least of these." On the contrary, the 12 are even in danger of having contempt for such lowly, unknown and insignificant Christians.

You know we have this miserable phenomenon in the reformed world now called the celebrity pastor. People have pointed out how silly it is that no matter which reformed conference you go to its always the same speakers. They are the reformed celebrity pastors. That's what the 12 want to be: Big time celebrity pastors who headline every conference.

And I'm sorry to say they want to be the only ones; they want to keep the status to themselves. They can't tolerate anyone outside their group ministering in the name of Jesus. For the 12, the point is not advancing the kingdom of God by any legitimate means; the point is retaining their special status as the apostles of Jesus. Let's look a little closer at this point.

The Inner Ring

The 12 want to keep the status all to themselves. When an unknown exorcist starts casting out demons in Jesus' name the 12 try to stop him. Their reason is that this unknown exorcist doesn't follow "us"! Now notice John didn't speak of the man failing to follow Jesus; he said the man fails to follow "us". That's a little surprising!

John, with the others, is apparently presuming on his position with Jesus; he is apparently seeing himself as too close to the center of the group; no doubt Jesus' special treatment of John, James and Peter contributes to this.

Either way, because the exorcist is not part of the group following Jesus the 12 try to stop him. Jesus corrects them for this. Jesus is open to others believing in him and ministering in his name,

even though they are not part of his travelling band. The working of a miracle in Jesus' name must, after all, glorify Jesus' name and of course it advances God's kingdom.

But let's make a connection here: The problem of the 12 in this story is proud ambition; they argue about who is best and they all want preeminence over the others. Just notice now how such proud ambition, which is sin, leads to sectarianism. Sectarianism is a foolish and sinful attachment to a particular party, in this case, within the Christian movement. We are seeing that one cause of sectarianism is nothing other than pride and sinful ambition. Perhaps this is the main cause.

But this is really important for us. Sadly, reformed Christians often act like they are the people and wisdom will die with them. This is nothing other than sinful sectarianism, and today's story condemns it.

I grant that reformed Christians are usually more mature in their thinking than many others. But I grieve to point out that they are often children when it comes to faith and zeal. I have known Christians with not a tenth of the knowledge possessed by your average reformed Christian, and yet that new Christian will very often blow the reformed Christian out of the water when it comes to evangelistic zeal, or humble faith, or the like.

This humble Christian will know nothing of the five points, they won't be able to articulate the finer points of the Trinity, and they can't answer a whole host of apologetic questions raised by the unbeliever. What they can do is believe God powerfully, and zealously long for his kingdom. And they can act. Too often reformed Christians act as if their feet are glued to the ground.

Oh, and in case you didn't know, Calvinists aren't exactly known for their love and humility. For some reason, only other Christians are required to have love and humility, but not Calvinists. I guess once you read two or three theology books God allows you to stop being loving and humble. I'm sorry to confess that some of the most bitter, angry, and vile people I've ever met, are men who claimed to be Calvinists. In their case, they may be Calvinists, but they aren't Christians. You can take that from Paul who says that our greatest religious deeds, if empty of the love-character, are worthless.

So, if I know all mysteries, and have the Canons of Dordt and the Christian Institutes memorized, and if I give my hours to reading the puritans, but have not love, I am nothing. The Vile Calvinist will never listen to this rebuke, I'm afraid, since he's busy "contending for the

truth". And as long as you are contending for the truth, you aren't required to obey the truth yourself.

Now some will think old Dave is off on a rabbit trail here, but that's not so. The text rebukes Christian sectarianism and reformed Christians have a major tendency to sectarianism, so I'm taking aim at it. I want us to be certain that we are not the people, and wisdom will not die with us. I want us to know the kingdom of God is bigger than the Calvinists. And I want us to know very clearly that a major portion of our Christian sectarianism, if we suffer from it, comes from nothing other than pride, arrogance and selfish ambition, just like the 12 disciples.

Despising the Little Ones

Now if possible, the next result of selfish ambition and pride is even worse than sectarianism. Based on Jesus' comments to the 12, it would seem the 12 are in danger even of having contempt for Christians whom they deem unimportant or insignificant.

Jesus addresses this first by calling a child to him as a visual aid. This is possibly a son of Peter or Andrew. Now in the time and place of Christ children were esteemed very low. If any member of society was seen as insignificant, unimportant, or even useless, it was a child. So Jesus is purposely using this kid as a representative of people who are deemed insignificant.

And yet Jesus says that if anyone should receive this child in hospitality because the child is a follower of Christ, that person will be receiving God the Father himself. Despite the insignificance of a child, if that child is a Christian, to do good to that child is to do good to God himself. We must say then, that child possesses an amazing value and significance after all. How foolish then for the 12 to be thinking in terms of personal advancement to greatness of position!

The second example Jesus uses is the exorcist I've already discussed. Briefly, the point is that the exorcist is an unknown outsider, and yet Jesus validates and accepts his ministry in Jesus' name.

The third example is not just someone who is unknown and insignificant, but someone who does something unknown and insignificant: They give a cup of water to a disciple of Jesus *because* they are a disciple of Jesus. Giving water was considered an absolute basic expectation of hospitality; not at all a spectacular deed for the kingdom of God. And yet Jesus insists that even this deed will be rewarded when the kingdom comes. It will not be overlooked; it is not actually insignificant.

The last example is someone harming the faith and obedience of the least Christian; that's what Jesus means by "causing them to stumble." The least Christian is so important to Jesus that

whoever harms their faith and obedience would be better off wearing a millstone collar and jumping in the ocean. A millstone was part of a system for grinding wheat; one source says it weighed over two hundred pounds.

So this is a chilling threat from Jesus to anyone who would harm the faith and obedience of even the least Christian, perhaps through false teaching or sinful example, or through temptation to sin.

Now what is the point here? We're looking at the pride and ambition of the disciples. We see it leads to contempt for lesser Christians. It's interesting that Jesus takes the conversation this direction. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Why are you guys so hyped about a high position over other Christians? Aren't you satisfied with just being Christians?! Don't you realize how high a position a Christian has just by being a Christian?"

And that leads to an important connection between our four examples: The child, the unknown exorcist, the cup of water, and the Christian who is caused to stumble. Do you see the connection? Why is receiving the child receiving God? Why does Jesus support the unknown exorcist? Why does the cup of water result in eternal reward? And why is the punishment so severe for causing the least Christian to stumble?

The common thread is a connection to Jesus. The child is received in Jesus' name. The unknown exorcist works in Jesus' name. The water cup is given in Jesus' name. And the least Christian who stumbles is a Christian, that is, they believe in Jesus.

In other words, there is no greatness, validity, or significance in any of the people mentioned. All of their value is derived from their connection to Jesus. The least Christian is unspeakably important because he is connected to the Christ! No matter their standing in society, no matter what denomination they're in, no matter how insignificant their ministry.

For this reason, contempt for "unimportant Christians" is ignorant, and Christians vying for higher positions within the church is silly and confused.

Out of Step with Jesus

Actually, it's worse than that. Christian self-promotion is not just confused, it's un-Christian. This is because being Christian means following in the footsteps of the Christ. And the Christ walked a completely different direction.

Remember how this text began? It began with a prediction that Jesus would be betrayed and killed. What an absurd contrast then, between the goal of Jesus Christ and the petty ambition of his disciples!

Jesus plans to lower himself to the lowest place, to become the slave of all that he might cleanse all. The 12 plan to bite, scratch and throw elbows to make their way to the top. See a problem? It's just that the most prestigious followers of Christ aren't following Christ, that's all!

So you see what following Christ means. Jesus was a man who lived his life only for the spiritual service of others. This service required him to lower himself. Whoever would follow Christ today must commit himself to the same spiritual service of others; he, too, must lower himself.

But the 12 want to exalt themselves. These things are not compatible. To be Christian and to be prideful is a contradiction. To be Christian and to be selfishly ambitious is a contradiction. To be Christian and to desire to be better than the next guy, to be bitterly competitive, is a contradiction. To be Christian is to lower ourselves as the Christ lowered himself, for the good of others to the glory of God.

How to Be Great

One last thing: Did Jesus rebuke them for seeking greatness in itself? Or did he rebuke them for seeking it the wrong way? Notice Jesus doesn't forbid them seeking greatness. On the contrary, he tells them how best to do it!

If you want to be great, become nothing. If you want to be first, become last. If you want to be above all, serve all. If you want to have honor, suffer shame. If you would have life, die. That's the way of Christ.

And that's just how it went for Christ. Philippians 2 has Jesus coming from the highest place to the lowest place, then ascending back up to the highest place. Because Jesus lowered himself, God conferred on him the name above every name. Because Jesus went low God made him high. For Jesus, exaltation came through humiliation. And it will be the same for us. Notice Paul uses that idea of Jesus' descent and ascent to persuade his readers to be humble.

So you would be very misled if you believed God wants you to choose lowliness and servanthood for its own sake. Lowliness and servanthood are a means to an end. The end is exaltation and rulership. And we should desire exaltation. We should desire it 20 times more than we do.

What then?

Selfish ambition and competitive pride are sins. They lead to contempt for the lowly and ugly sectarianism. Even worse, they put us out of step with the Christ whom we claim to follow. Not that we shouldn't desire to be glorious. We must desire such glory. But Jesus teaches us to reach that glory by the path of lowly, humble service.

We are guilty of these sins, everyone of us. The only answer is confession of sin, request of forgiveness, and faith in Christ who atones for our sin. And everyone who confesses and trusts in Christ can be fully assured of acceptance and forgiveness. Our proud ambition can all be forgiven. So let's apply to God for mercy.