

The Heart of Discipleship

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 9:30-41

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Randy Lovelace

Denial of Self

Defining Greatness

As Dr. Koch alluded to earlier at the beginning of the service, he was pointing out that this passage is in many ways at the heart of the gospel message. We looked at last week that the heart of faith is the cry of the father when he says I believe, but help me in my unbelief.

This week we turn to this passage which clearly declares that we don't just have the heart of faith, but we have the heart of discipleship. We see how the Lord instructs us for what it means to follow him. But this teaching comes again in the contrast to his disciples, who've been with him, who've been with him on the Mount of Transfiguration, who've seen him perform miracles. And yet they still don't get it.

So it's an opportunity for us, as it is recorded preserved for us in Scripture, that the Holy Spirit would enable us to hear and receive who Christ is, but also what is the heart of discipleship. Hear now from God's word, Mark 9:30-41.

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "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." ³² But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

³⁸ John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "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. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me. Lord, we ask that by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit you would help us to go to the heart of faith and the heart of

discipleship, to be able to say Lord, we believe, yet help us in our unbelief. But Lord, we ask that in the process of faith we will learn what it means to follow you, to deny ourselves as you did, and to follow you in the way. Though it may mean suffering, though it may mean not taking the spotlight, though it may mean doing things we think insignificant—but because we do it in your name it makes all the difference. Help us a lowered to believe and to walk in discipleship. Help us. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We look at two things you see in your outline this morning. **The Denial of Self**, verses 30-32. And secondly, **Defining Greatness**, verses 33-41. **Denial of Self** and **Defining Greatness**.

So, the **Denial of Self**. This is Jesus recognizing that he is getting closer to the cross. But he understands that the more public the profession of what he was about to do, the sooner the cross would come. As we get closer to that event you will see and be reminded that Jesus's life was not taken from him. He gave his life. Though they thought they were doing their will, they could not fathom that actually it was Jesus who gave himself up and he was doing the will of the Father.

But here in these times of private teaching with his disciples he utters the ultimate words of the denial of self. "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." That sentence—or two—that description, is the preeminent definition of the denial of self. This is God made man, who knew no sin, would be offered on a cross so that we might receive the forgiveness of sins, so that we might be restored, which was the theme of our week—restored to the relationship with our heavenly Father.

Samuel Rutherford in one of his letters wrote about Christ in so many different ways. This is one of my favorites. Samuel Rutherford was a Scottish Presbyterian minister. His writing is truly beautiful. And here's what he says of Christ. "Put the beauty of ten thousand, thousand worlds of paradises like the Garden of Eden in one. Put all trees, all flowers, all smells, all colors, all tastes, all joys, all sweetness, all loveliness in one. Oh, what a fair and excellent thing that would be. And yet it would be less to that fair and dearest, well-beloved Christ than one drop of rain to the whole of the seas, rivers, lakes, and fountains of ten thousand Earths."

He is saying, if we can imagine, as we've just done this past week... And Jim Murduck, who I hope you're here... Jim Murduck, are you here this morning? If he's not, he'll know we talked about him. Jim Murduck is an astrophysicist and he came to our class and unpacked in about forty fi45ve minutes the vastness of the world that Christ created by the will of his Father. And we looked at the beauty of space. When we consider the most beautiful weather that you can imagine, when we can think of the most sweetest of smells like the honeysuckle in spring, the most beautiful sunsets or sunrises, the most beautiful of music—if we take all the beauty, it would all be as Samuel Rutherford says, it would be a drop in comparison to the beauty of Christ.

And yet Jesus would not have us look at him as something which was beautiful. He would want us to see him as the suffering servant. That the creator of all the world would give himself over to the hands of those he actually created. He, the display of righteousness and justice, would willingly give himself over to an unjust trial. He, who has created all the beauty of the world,

would willingly give himself over to a form of death that even—as we taught our class this week—that even the Romans in polite company would not even utter the phrase ‘crucifixion.’ It was so utterly contemptible that even the Romans would not speak of it, which is why Jesus was crucified on a garbage heap outside of Jerusalem. Jesus, whose words are life, willingly gave himself over to receive insults from those who passed by him.

Because, you see, the denial of self is holding one coin that is the same but with different sides. Jesus in one person embodies both glory, but also cross. You see, the cross for Christ is glory. You can't have the glory without the cross, because in the cross the weakness—or so it seemed—the weakness of God becomes the power to save. The glory cannot be seen without seeing that the one who made us was willing to come and to serve us. How can we wrap our minds around this fact, that for Christ, glory is the cross. In the cross there is glory, and there is the denial of self. To have the glory without the cross makes Jesus a teacher, not a redeemer. To have the cross without the glory of the resurrection makes Christ a martyr, who was not a victor. Jesus turns every definition of success and every example of service upside down.

And Jesus came to serve and not to be served. This is what he was telling his disciples. And yet they did not understand and they were afraid to ask him. So instead of asking him, instead of going further in that—as if he hadn't already made it clear—they continued to go on their way. And they began trying to define greatness. After Jesus says what is about to happen to him, they are now arguing who is the greatest among them. Who will have the best seat.

I'm grateful again that this is in the Bible, because it demonstrates something that is so at the heart of what it means to be human. We want to know about position. We want to know what it's in it for us. We want to know will the outcome suit us, will it be to our good. And this is what they were arguing about. The reason why this message is something that Jesus knows needs to be taught to his disciples is yet another reason why it's recorded in scripture. That whether you are a Christian or not, this is been recorded in Scripture. And if you are a Christian, we must always be aware that this was the center point of Jesus's teaching. It was the center point of Paul's teaching. Paul taught about weakness and his union with Christ in his weakness over and over again. It was the one thing that the church at Corinth could not stand, the fact that Paul would talk about this. And he talks about it over and over and over again.

The reason why we need to hear this is because at our hearts, in that place, is still what we talked about last week: Lord, I believe, but help me in my own belief. That unbelief is every form of pride, every form of self-sufficiency, every form of wanting recognition, every form of how and in what ways we want to be thought of as significant. Lord, help us in our unbelief. We will never outgrow this message. Jesus knows it and here's why. If his own disciples who were sitting with him heard Jesus say to them, “The one who would be first must be last,” and yet they did not get it and Jesus was right there, how much more than do we not need to continue to hear this.

But this is what Jesus would say to their argument, and here's what Jesus does in regard to defining greatness. Verse 33. He says: “And they came to Capernaum. And when he was with them in the house... “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way...(because, you see, they know they're caught)...And they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If

anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” So what he says, what Jesus is saying is, you want to know about position? So this is the first thing about defining greatness. You think it's about position? And for the disciples they thought well, the position that matters most in this economy is being right next to you, is being at the high position where the power is. Jesus says no, it's about being at the lowest position, the form of a servant.

But then something else continues. And he said, well, he took a child and he put him in the midst of them, “and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.’” So you see the chain. Jesus says if you receive a child in my name you receive me, but not only me, you receive the one who sent me. So it's the whole chain. If you do this in my name you are participating in the relationship with the Godhead.

So Jesus is teaching something about greatness. The greatness is not in your position. The greatness even is not necessarily in your action. It is the reason you go into it. It is the purpose for which you do it. The purpose here is for the sake of my name. Dependence upon me is essentially what he is saying. And so he takes a small child, one that would have been insignificant. Even if you just receive a child in my name, you've already done something significant. So Jesus says defining greatness is not about your name and which one will be to my right or to my left, it is my name.

Thirdly, at the second part of that verse 37 he says defining greatness has everything to do with hospitality, but not the wining and dining of people who are famous or who are high and mighty. No, he simply says if you receive a child in my name you've received me. And then more so than that, a little bit later he goes on to say if somebody in my name simply offers you—knowing that you belong to me—simply offers you a cup of water, that is itself a significant act of hospitality.

Notice that turns on its head exactly where the disciples just were. They're arguing about where are they going to be. In essence, who will show us hospitality? Who's going to be recognized as the greatest? Who's going to have the best seat at the table? Who's going to be the closest to the decision-making power of this organization, Jesus? And they know that once he says, “What were you discussing,” they now know the pettiness of their argument, in light of who they're with. Jesus says *mnn-nn*. It's not about where you will be or who receive you. It's about who are you receiving in my name. In essence, who are you serving in my name?

More than that, he continues. He talks about position. He talks about name. He talks about hospitality. But then verse 38, watch what happens. John said to him. . . Now, John was brave. He says, “ ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not with us, he was not following us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able to soon afterward speak evil of me.’” It gives us an insight into the mindset of the disciples. Not only were they arguing which position were they going to have, they now see that the mission of Jesus seems to them to be something very exclusive. Hey, that guy over there is doing stuff in your name. He's not following us, do you see. They see the mission of Jesus as being exclusive. But Jesus in response to him them says no, it's not exclusive, it's inclusive.

He's saying think about it. They've already failed, by the way. Remember they couldn't heal the man's son of his demon possession. They were trying to do it in their own strength. Now they're walking along and they're saying hey, that guy over there—how does he get to do that? He's not following us. It's about the pronoun *us*. And Jesus says no. In essence, I give my gifts widely. My mission is not narrow, it's open and generous. His mission is ever-expanding, not more and more exclusive, which is exactly what the disciples are dripping of.

Where will you be? What do we get to do? Why are they doing that? And Jesus says no. Your argument is really just born out of petty jealousy. They're just jealous that someone who's not with them is performing things, but they're doing it in Jesus' name. And Jesus says wait a second. If they're doing it in my name, they're doing it by faith. And if they're doing it in my name, they can't be against me. In other words, disciples, it's not about you. It's about what's being done in my name. It's about the mission of the Kingdom of God. It's not exclusive, it's ever expanding to include those who you might be surprised to know are doing things in my name.

And then something else, verse 40. “For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives a cup of water to drink because you belong to me will by no mean lose his reward.” What Jesus is now doing is he saying something about actions. So I want you to pay close attention to this, particularly now that we're finished with VBS and we can look back on it with reflection.

What Jesus does in these words, as he already did in verse 37 with regard to the child, Jesus removes the spectrum that we often think of when we think about actions and things we do. We tend to think about actions of whether they are significant or they might be trivial. Of whether things are known to have an effect or are they just kind of in support. Our whole culture is wrapped up in this. It's in the water and air that we breathe. Jesus removes the spectrum of significant and trivial, and he begins to put actions in a very different light. He did this, as I said, when he was talking about receiving a child in his name, and here he concludes that his mission will contain a wide and ever expanding range of tasks. That it is not about something being significant or trivial, it's about the one to whom and in whose name you do it.

So this past week we had teachers, we had people who were up on stage, we had people who were leading in dancing, we had people who were pouring cups of water, we had people who every single night put meals on trays and took them around to different rooms, we had people put gaffer's tape on stuff but never got to see it built in its final form or experience by the children for whom they built it. On a Sunday morning there are a group of people in this room, who, by the time they're done, they have to change shirts because they're so hot setting up these chairs. There are people setting up coffee every week. There are people who are teaching our children and who are changing diapers in the nursery. There are people who've put these bulletins together that some people might read and some people might not. There's people who are sitting back in that room back there who have to pay attention to every single thing that happens in the service, that they're not actually able to worship because they want to make sure that the next slide is where it needs to be.

There are no significant and trivial tasks in the body of Christ. The people who've prepared the coffee for people they may not know and may not meet or who may not even particularly care

whether the coffee is there or not, they did that. And I tell you that is as significant as my declaring the gospel to you. That's what Jesus says. Because he says if someone offers you a cup of water—OK, offers you a cup of coffee in my name, that's significant. Why? Because we set up chairs, we do the sound, we preach a sermon, we change diapers to obey and walk with Christ.

Now we may forget that. And some of you may be here saying that I prepared that coffee and I wasn't exactly thinking about Jesus. Well you know what? Do you know it's possible to preach a sermon without thinking about Jesus, either? Do you know that you can get so good at a task you can begin to do it in self-dependence and forget the one for whom you do it. This isn't about just remembering it, body. This is about me. This is about you. Because this is about Jesus and he means for us to know that he came and gave his life to be a servant, so that you and I get to in his name serve one another. It's not about the significant, it's not about the trivial. It's about the one to whom we render the service.

That is the heart of discipleship. I forget it, which is why I need this scripture. And I believe the Holy Spirit will use it in your life, as well. I end this sermon with this reflection. It's a very old one, it's from the fourth century. And he describes Jesus. He says this:

In everything which concerns the Lord we find lessons in humility. As an infant he was straight away laid in a cave, and not upon a couch, but in a manger. In the house of a carpenter and of a mother who was poor he was subject to his mother and his father. He was taught and paid heed to what he needed not to be told. He asked questions, but even in the asking he won admiration for his wisdom. He submitted to John. The Lord received baptism at the hands of his servant.

He did not make use of the marvelous power that he possessed to resist any of those who attacked him, but as if yielding to superior force, he allowed temporal authority to exercise the power proper to it. He was brought before the High Priest as though a criminal and then led to the governor. He bore wounds in silence and submitted to a sentence, although he could have refuted the false witnesses. He was spat upon by slaves and by the vilest of menials. He delivered himself up to death, the most shameful death known to men.

Thus from his birth to the end of his life he experienced all the exigencies that befall mankind. And after displaying humility to such a degree, he manifested his glory, associated with himself in glory those who had shared his disgrace.

What is he saying? This is Basil of Caesarea, at around the end of the fourth century. He is declaring that if we receive salvation that means we are united to Christ in his suffering. And to be united with his suffering means that we are united to his suffering even in service. But what we will find in serving one another and walking the path in the heart of discipleship, which is the denial of self and seeing greatness by giving away rather than receiving—we begin to see and hear, as Paul declared, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I might gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the

righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” [Philippians 3:8-11, ESV]

The path to glory is the path of humility, because that is the heart of discipleship. May the Lord, by His Spirit, fill you with a purpose to do all things in his name and for his glory, that we might grow in what it means to follow our king who laid himself down for us.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, by your Spirit, preach this to us throughout this coming week. That you in your vastness, your glory, your all-encompassing power made yourself low by taking on human flesh, to die on the cross for our sins. Chief among those is pride. But you took that place and were raised on the third day. And now you have ascended to the highest place. Lord, by your Holy Spirit, will you help us to walk the path of discipleship, to learn again today what is at the heart of it. And so we give ourselves afresh again to you this morning, Redeemer, King. May you make us increasingly in your image, that we might see that in the cross there is glory, and in your glory there is the cross—that we might find resurrection. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.