

Mark 9: 30-35; “What is True Greatness?”, Sermon # 76 in the series – “Astonished at His Teaching”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on September 18th, 2016, in the Morning Worship Service.

True Christianity always involves a cross for each one of us who believes in the Lord Jesus. You cannot be Jesus’ disciple unless you deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Him. As one of those people who may have just begun to follow Jesus, you may not understand completely why you have to do this. You do not understand why Jesus had to suffer, and die, and rise again. You are willing to follow Jesus, but there are certain things that you do not understand about what it will mean to follow Jesus. There are certain things which you need to be taught very practically if you are to glorify God with your life. And so, this is where we want to take our stand this morning. We want to look at the lessons related to true greatness which Jesus taught His disciples on that day, so long ago. And as we look at those lessons, I pray that you will come to see what it means to be great in the eyes of the Lord. I want you to see that it takes grace to be truly great in the eyes of the Lord. And this grace will lead to a sincere and humble obedience to the One who has died for you, and who was raised from the dead so that you would have His Spirit in your life.

The Christian who would be faithful to the Lord is not interested in being great in the eyes of men. They are not interested even in being great in their own eyes. But, they should be interested in being great in the eyes of the Lord. It was said of John the Baptist, prophetically in Luke 1: 15 that: “He would be great in the sight of the Lord.” This ought to be your object in living your Christian life. So let us ask ourselves, in relation to this text, how this might come about? I think that there are 3 ways that a Christian can become great in the eyes of the Lord. We will look at these ways to greatness by examining the actions and the words of the Lord Jesus on this occasion. The 1st way to greatness in God’s eyes is to cultivate a private spiritual life in His sight. (Verse 30) The 2nd way to greatness is not only to expect opposition, suffering, and death; but also resurrection. (Verses 31 and 32) The 3rd way to greatness is to not dispute about it, but rather serve others. Let us understand that God’s ways are not our ways, and let us now humble ourselves to receive this teaching.

1st of all – The way to greatness in God’s eyes is to cultivate a private spiritual life in His sight.

Verse 30 says, “Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it.” Why didn’t Jesus want anyone to know that He was leaving Caesarea Philippi and entering into Galilee? It was because he had just before this performed a great miracle and cast a demon out of an epileptic young man, and the people there had wanted to follow Him because they now thought of Him as being great. They wanted to make Him a king. They thought of Him as a political deliverer. And so they thought that it would be a great thing if they could help Him to establish a worldly kingdom; something that they would be well-pleased with; but something which would not solve any of their real problems with sin. Jesus, however, was not interested in political solutions which might bring outward peace and joy to men. He was interested in being the solution to man’s greatest problem, which is sin. In Luke 9: 43, after He healed this demon-possessed epileptic boy, it says: “And they were all amazed at the majesty of God.” “But while everyone marveled at all the things which Jesus did, He said to His disciples, ‘Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men.’” You see, all of these people were marveling over what Jesus could do to heal the body. But Jesus was more concerned with our redemption, rather than being thought of as being great.

A truly great person does not go about to establish their own greatness. That is selfish ambition. And the temptation to this sin is especially great when people think highly of you for your abilities. Jesus is here teaching us that the way to true greatness is to not to seek to be great in the eyes of men; but rather to be humbly cultivating the secret life of prayer. It is cultivating the private life of withdrawing from men to have communion with God; and thus to prepare yourself for further service to God, and the sufferings which might come with it. This was the continual practice of our Lord Jesus after His doing some great work or miracle. It was to hide himself. It was to make Himself of no reputation. In this case he hid Himself, and took His disciples with Him, for He had things to teach them. This is the very opposite of what a selfish and worldly person will do. Turn with me to the book of Philippians Chapter 2, verse 5. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross." "Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name...."

This is the path to true greatness; it is to make yourself of no reputation as the Lord Jesus did in His incarnation and in the way that He conducted Himself in His life and ministry. He was God, but He concealed His visible glory, that He might come amongst us as a man and live a life of perfect service to God and to man. This is how He would accomplish our redemption; our being purchased back from our sins. He humbled Himself and became obedient. And it is His having done this to the point of death, even the death of the cross, that thereby gives us who believe in Him salvation. This humbling Himself to the point of death was the basis of God's raising Him from the dead. And God's raising Him from the dead is the basis of His giving us the spiritual strength to live our lives in this same way that is pleasing to God. The greatness of His grace should make us humble. His grace, when we receive it in truth, causes us to hide our own glory and not to seek it. Christ's hiding his own glory was an act of true greatness, although the people in this world could only perceive His greatness when He manifested His glory. John 2: 11 says: "This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him."

God the Father knew that His Son's greatness was based upon His humility, and His cultivation of this secret life of prayer and communion with Him. God the Father is the One who is the great evaluator of men. Men may boast in themselves and try to take glory to themselves. They may seek honor from one another and not that honor which comes from the only God. In John 5: 44, Jesus says: "How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?" But I hope that you will see that our Lord did all of His service and all of His good works in order to bring glory to God through the way that He did them; as well as His doing them, to help men. He did not do them to be able to be seen as great in the eyes of men. Rather, He did each and every one of His good works in order that God might be glorified. He hid His own glory and focused on His obeying God even to the point of the death of the cross.

Jesus also knew that because of the greatness of the things that He was doing in healing people, and in teaching them the truth, that He was envied and hated by those who wrongly thought that He was seeking His own glory. Part of Jesus' humbling Himself to the point of death was to instruct those who did not understand, that they were sinners who needed to repent, and to believe in Him. Many of these people thought that Jesus was speaking from His own authority as a man when He said things like that. They did not understand; they did not want to understand, that He was the Son of God who had authority from His Father to say and do the things that He did. Turn with me to John Chapter 7 and verse 1. "After these things Jesus walked in Galilee; for He did not want to walk in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill

Him.” “Now the Jew’s Feast of Tabernacles was at hand.” “His brothers therefore said to Him, ‘Depart from here and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may see the works that You are doing.’” “For no one does anything in secret while he himself seeks to be known openly.” “If you do these things, show Yourself to the world.”

You see, here is the unbeliever’s way of looking at greatness in people. They expect people to show themselves off, and prove that they are great. They are not supposed to hide anything from the general public who are evaluating them. They must prove their greatness to people around them. But this is not true greatness in God’s sight. This passage goes on to say in verse 5 – “For even His brothers did not believe in Him.” “Then Jesus said to them, ‘My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready.’” “The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil.” “You go up to this feast.” “I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come.” You see, Jesus was working according to a different purpose and plan than his brothers were. He was praying in secret about all that He was doing. He wanted to fulfill the Father’s timing and the Father’s will in a way that would honor Him and please Him. This, I am saying, is what you and I should desire to do as well. This is making ourselves of no reputation. This is humbling ourselves in our obedience. This will cause worldly people to wonder about us. This will occasion some people to think badly of us. Look at verse 10 – “But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret.” “Then the Jews sought Him at the feast, and said, ‘Where is He?’” “And there was much complaining among the people concerning Him.” “Some said, ‘He is good’; others said, ‘No, on the contrary, He deceives the people.’” “However, no one spoke openly of Him for fear of the Jews.”

You can see here, once again, the Lord Jesus’ greatness in the sight of God. He does not do things to fall in line with the agenda of men, to meet their expectations of what they thought greatness was, or what they thought it should be. He lived and cultivated the private of life of prayer and obedience to God. And yet, He still came out at the right time, to seek to teach men the true and right way, as a part of that life of obedience. This is what you and I should pray to do as well. Look at verse 14. “Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught.” “And the Jews marveled, saying, ‘How does this Man know letters, having never studied?’” “Jesus answered them and said, ‘My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me.’” “If anyone will to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.” “He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him.”

You see, this is the principle of truth that you and I need so much to lay hold of today. Many people today are more interested in getting degrees in theological learning than they are in cultivating this secret life of prayer and obedience to God. I do not want to disparage theological training or the value of learning from godly Biblical teachers. This is very good where it can be obtained. But the end of all this learning is not obtaining the degree. It end of all learning not to be seen as great in the eyes of men. It is using the knowledge that you have obtained to glorify God. It is using that knowledge to serve God, and to be useful to Him in a way where you acknowledge your need to cultivate the secret life of devotion, and the right kind of public life of service. Are you doing this? Or are you a servant only of men, and what they think of you, and how they evaluate you? There is something much greater than this to take cognizance of; and that is the approval of God. Approved unto God; The A.U.G. degree. That is worth more than all the degrees which men or colleges can confer. O that every Christian would seek for this degree, and obtain it, by living and cultivating the secret life of heart communion with the Father and with the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit! Remember Psalm 25, verse 14 – “The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant.” Remember 1st Peter 5: 6 – “Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.” (or at the proper time)

Now, The 2nd way to greatness is to expect opposition, suffering, and death; but also resurrection. (verses 31 and 32)

“For He taught His disciples and said to them, ‘The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him.’ ‘And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.’ ‘But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him.’ Luke’s gospel says that this saying was, ‘hidden from them.’ Matthew’s gospel says, ‘And they were exceedingly sorrowful.’ It is very evident that the disciples, as much as they loved the Lord Jesus, did not understand the mission of their Lord and Master. And what is more, I do not believe that they really wanted to understand. Why do I say this? I say this because they were exceedingly sorrowful over this news. They did not want to believe that suffering for the sake of righteousness and truth was the way forward to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. They only looked upon Jesus’ having to suffer as something dark, and depressing, and mysterious. They thought of it as not having any gleam of light that it could shed on the future greatness of Christ’s Kingdom. But think with me about what He said. Yes, He had said that He was to be betrayed. Yes, He had said that He was to suffer, being delivered into the hands of men. Yes, He had said that He was to be killed. But was that the end of it? No, beloved. He also declared that He was to rise from the dead on the third day after He was killed! The gospel is good news because of Christ’s resurrection.

Let us receive it anew and afresh today. It is the resurrection of Christ that gives us hope. It was the resurrection that proved that God accepted Christ’s obedience, and His sacrifice, as the basis of our being forgiven, when we believe in Him. It is the resurrection of Christ which takes away our sadness which we have, over our sins, and it is His resurrection which causes us to rejoice! It is the resurrection of Christ which gives us that joy which no man can take away from us. Not one of the disciples on this occasion asked Jesus to explain this to them. Peter, who was usually bold to speak, was silent. He remembered the rebuke of former days, and he, as the others, was afraid to ask. When he should not have spoken before, he did, and he took Satan’s part against Jesus’ going to the cross. Now that Jesus had declared that He was going to the cross, Peter was silent when he should have spoken. He should have said, ‘Lord, explain to us the mystery.’ ‘How can it be a good thing that you be betrayed?’ ‘How can it be a good thing that you be killed?’ ‘And what will this mean, that you will rise again?’ Instead, he and the others only focused on Jesus’ being betrayed and killed.

Judas must have almost jumped out of his skin! He was even at that very time thinking of how he could betray His Master. And yet he thought that could carefully conceal his evil thoughts from everyone around him; even the Lord. He would deceive himself into thinking that he could bring good things to himself by the money that he would make off the transaction of betraying his Master. But Jesus had stated that He was going to rise from the dead! What! All of his plans would come to nothing? Did he not have ears? No, he did not have ears to hear spiritual things. No, greatness does not come by deceitful scheming. But the news of these things was grievous indeed to all the other disciples. And since they didn’t understand the word which Jesus spoke, of His being raised from the dead; how could they rejoice?

This leads me to say that sometimes we as Christians do not focus on all the truth that we should, in terms of our being Christ’s disciple in the midst of our trials. We focus on the things which are hard and difficult, like denying ourselves, and picking up our cross, and we either forget, or we do not understand, or we do not focus on the fact that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! He is risen indeed! We forget the truth that by our exercising our faith, that He is, and He will be, giving us strength, and peace, and joy in the midst of our trials. The real question is: Will we look for His help with eyes of faith? Through neglect or unbelief in regard to the word which we have read, and the word which was spoken to us, we consciously allow our own evaluations of what we are presently hearing or seeing, to take control of us. And this disturbs us, and this moves us to be very sad and sorrowful. We tend to ignore or dismiss the words that would give us hope and joy. ‘Everything is against me’, we say. ‘All is bad news.’

If we are suffering as a Christian, the truth of what we are forced to endure sinks down into our hearts and it stifles our faith. We look at the trial, we see the hardship and the difficulty, we feel the sorrow and the sadness and the pain of the conflict, but we do not think upon Christ's death and His resurrection! He died to overcome our sin. He died to overcome death, so that we would rise to newness of life and have power in doing God's will. Yes, it is true that the disciple of Christ will experience pain, and sorrow, and grief and loss, and the rejection of unbelieving people. But let us remember that Christ has not only died that we might endure such things, but He has been raised from the dead that we might triumph in them, and through them, by the power of His resurrection. Listen to the language of Paul in Romans Chapter 8, verse 31 and make it your own. "What then shall we say to these things?" "If God is for us, who can be against us?" "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" "Who shall bring a charge against God's Elect?" "It is God who justifies." "Who is He who condemns?" "It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" "As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.'" "Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." There it is my dear brethren. The power and the love of Christ which the risen Christ establishes in the hearts of His people. We are to expect opposition, suffering, and death; but we should always remember that Christ is raised from the dead. He is our helper in every trial, even when men may fail us. Nothing shall separate us from the greatness of the love of Jesus Christ. This is the way to our being great in God's sight; to believe in Christ's resurrection; and because of Him being raised, that we would look forward to our own. God will put this all together for us, even when we die.

The Apostle Paul is a good example of this in Philippians 3, verse 7-11. "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ." "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if by any means I may attain to the resurrection of the dead." "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me." Remember that Christ leads us along as a Good Shepherd. We follow in His steps. His rod and His staff they comfort us. It is God's gentleness with us that makes us great as believers. Listen to David in Psalm 18, verse 31 – "For who is God, except the Lord?" "And who is a rock, except our God?" "It is God who arms me with strength, and makes my way perfect." "He makes my feet like the feet of deer, and sets me on my high places." "He teaches my hands to make war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze." "You have also given me the shield of Your salvation; Your right hand has held me up, Your gentleness has made me great." "You enlarged my path under me, so my feet did not slip." That is God's way with you, beloved; glory in the way of difficulty and suffering. His gentleness has made you great, and He will make you greater still, for Jesus' sake.

Then, the 3rd way to greatness is to not dispute about who is the greatest, but rather to serve others. (Verses 33-35)

"Then Jesus came to Capernaum." "And when He was in the house He asked them, 'What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?' "But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest." "And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Now, notice that Jesus did not quash the idea of greatness in the life of a disciple; He merely re-

defines it and lets it go into their minds as a fixed principle. "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." That is not the way that the disciples had thought of greatness. They desired to be first. They had desired to be looked up to, and admired, and served by others because Jesus had given them a position as Apostles. They no doubt thought of the various reasons why they themselves could legitimately consider themselves to be the greatest. Peter, because he had declared Jesus to be the Christ; Nathaniel, because Jesus had told him that he was a man without guile and Jesus had promised him that he would see greater things still; John, because he was the disciple that Jesus loved; Levi, because he had brought Jesus to his house where many sinners had heard the gospel.

Each disciple could think in their own heart and mind of reasons why they ought to be considered the greatest because of something that they had done or said for Jesus, or because of something Jesus had done for them, or said to them. In the original Greek, the words, "would be" the greatest, or which one "was" the greatest are not included. So it would read, "They had disputed among themselves who the greatest." This implies that they compared themselves to each other and wanted to try to rank each other in order of greatness. Well, Jesus sat down and called the twelve to him and said to them: "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." In other words, that person who desired to be first would not do what these disciples had been doing; evaluating in their minds, comparing themselves with themselves, measuring themselves by themselves, in order to then assert who was the greatest or who should be first among them. Rather, the greatest will be the one who was humble enough to put himself in last place, and who would consciously attempt to become the servant of all. The original Greek reads this way: "If one wills (has the will and determination) to be first." The meaning of the word, "first", should not be thought of in the absolute sense (as Rome makes Peter first), but first relatively, first among the disciples with whom he associated; that is, if he wants to hold first rank among them, 'he will be last of all', humbly putting all the others ahead of him and he would be happy to take the last place of all." (Lenski)

As we close this sermon, I would like to ask you if you now see the way to greatness. True greatness is not in the eyes of men, but God. True greatness cultivates a secret humble life. True greatness sees the difficulties of living godly in Christ and that they should expect to suffer for Christ's sake at certain points. But true greatness will also remember Christ's resurrection power; His great power which he or she will continually pray and seek for, in relation to serving Christ and promoting His kingdom and His glory. Let me ask you if you are willing to serve in a humble context. Are you "content to fill a little place that God be glorified", as it says in Anna Warring's hymn, number 444 in our hymnal? It says, "I ask Thee for the daily strength, to none that ask denied, a mind to blend with outward life, while keeping at thy side, content to fill a little space, if Thou be glorified." "In service which they will appoints there are no bonds for me; my secret heart is taught the truth that makes Thy children free; a life of self-renouncing love is one of liberty." That is how you joyfully take the last place and become first and the greatest. That is how you learn to see serving Christ as greater than any formal position that you might hold; whether it is pastor, or deacon, or Sunday-School teacher, or no position at all. This is the path to true greatness in God's sight. Let us pray to take that position and be content with our fellowship with Christ.