

# True Greatness

Following Jesus to the Cross: Part 6  
Mark 9:33-36a (Mt.18:1-3, Lk.9:46-47) 9/7/2019

We read of the disciples arguing who was the greatest, and we see it as immature and crass. But all of us have far more of that in us than we realize. This sermon will help you discover areas of self-exaltation and show the path toward true greatness.

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**Mark 9:30** They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, **31** because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." **32** But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

**33** They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" **34** But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

**35** Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." **36** He took a little child and had the child stand among them.

Taking him in his arms, he said to them, **37** "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

**38 "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." 39 "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No-one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us.**

## Introduction

Do you think you could ever be one of the greats—a truly great man or woman? Let me ask you this: who is greater, Mozart, or Abraham Lincoln? Or how about between Alexander Graham Bell, who gave us the telephone, or Alexander Fleming, who gave us penicillin? Or Alexander the Great, who conquered the world by age 25 and who has the word “great” right in his name? Which of those men is greater? Well, it depends on how you define greatness, right? What is greatness? The disciples evidently thought they knew.

**34 ... they had argued about who was the greatest.**

They had to be arguing based on something. Each one of those guys had some standard of greatness in their minds and they were giving reasons and evidences to prove that they were closer to that standard than all the others. In today’s passage, Jesus is going to show us what was wrong with their definition and teach us what our attitude about greatness should be.

Now, the context here is important. In the previous paragraph, Jesus had once again taught them about his coming suffering and they had once again not understood what he meant. They go blind and deaf whenever Jesus talks on that subject, and today Mark is going to show us the cause of that blindness and deafness. And that’s great for us because the spiritual disease in their hearts that caused it is probably the most common spiritual disease there is. And so we all need to see the cure Jesus gives them so we can take it as well, otherwise we’ll also go blind and deaf at crucial moments when God is speaking to us.

### The Blinding Effect of Self-Exaltation

**33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the<sup>1</sup> house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"**

We’ll see in a minute that Jesus already knew the answer because he knew their thoughts.<sup>2</sup> But he asks them anyway to force them to see the problem. Sometimes before Jesus can teach us something he has to force us to take a look inside our own hearts to see things we didn’t know were there because there are lessons he wants to teach us that are impossible for us to receive until we’ve dealt with some problem in our hearts. That’s what’s going on here.

One of the hardest steps in discipleship is learning the truth about your own heart.<sup>3</sup> What is the first half of Mark about? Who Jesus is. In the first half of Mark they learn who Jesus is; in the second half they learn who they are. The second half is about Jesus going to the cross and his followers following in his steps. But before we can follow in his steps we have to discover some things in our hearts that are preventing us from that. One of the main purposes of the second half of Mark is to show us the diseases in our hearts that prevent us from denying ourselves and following him.

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<sup>1</sup> The same house that had been his headquarters during his Galilean ministry. Probably Jesus’ house, or perhaps Peter’s.

<sup>2</sup> Even though they don’t answer, he goes on to talk about seeking greatness, so he clearly knew. Luke states explicitly that he knew their thoughts (Luke 9:47).

<sup>3</sup> In the first half of the book they learned who Jesus is; the second half of Mark is about what Jesus came to do (the cross) and what the implications are for his followers (discipleship—following Jesus in the path of suffering). And so Jesus devoted a great deal of effort in the second half showing the disciples the truth about their own hearts so they could follow him. So it wouldn’t be wrong to say in the first half they learn who Jesus is and in the second half they learn who they are.

# Afraid to Answer

And it's amazing how Jesus does that here. All he does is ask a simple question.

## **33 ... "What were you arguing about on the road?" 34 But they kept quiet**

In v.32 they were afraid to ask a question; now in v.34 they are afraid to answer one. Why won't they answer?

## **34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.**

They didn't answer because they were embarrassed. The moment Jesus asks the question they immediately know that there was something wrong with what they had been doing. Were they aware they were doing something wrong while they were having the discussion? I don't know. If they were like me, they probably weren't even thinking about whether it was right or wrong; they were just focused on winning the argument they were in. But the moment Jesus just asks them to say what they were arguing about, they immediately know something was wrong with it.

## Quest for Greatness

And what's that? What was wrong with their discussion? Again, instead of telling us, Mark shows us.

### The Proper Response

But before we look at that response, let's remind ourselves what the response should have been. What did Jesus teach them back in ch.8 when he brought this up the first time? He told them, "I'm going to be rejected and suffer and die, so if you want to follow me, you're going to have to follow me, which means you'll also be rejected and suffer and die. The only way to follow me is to deny yourself. That means you have to renounce yourself as the predominant figure in your life. You have to renounce the effort to gain the treasures and pleasures and prominence and honors of this world and follow me into rejection, humiliation, suffering, and death.

That's what he taught them in ch.8. Now, one chapter later, Jesus brings it up again. "I'm going to be delivered into the hands of men and suffer and die." Did that jog their memory—"Oh, that's right. He suffers; we suffer. We need to deny ourselves and give up the pursuit of earthly greatness"?

No. It's so easy to hear Jesus say things like, "If anyone would follow me he must deny himself," and say, "Okay, I'll deny myself," and have no idea what that looks like in practical terms. We don't even realize how many things we do each day that are the opposite of self-denial. And so Jesus gives a practical application. "Guys, remember the self-denial thing?" "Yeah." "You know that conversation you just had on the road?" "Yeah." "That's the opposite of self-denial." Denying your self is much easier said than done. It requires a complete reversal of our whole approach to life.

### A Universal Problem

This is a crucial lesson that every one of us needs to learn. I listened to a lot of sermons on this passage, and it's amazing to me how shocked all the preachers are at the childishness of the disciples. They go on and on: "I can't believe they were arguing who was greatest—such incredible immaturity!" If this shocks you, it's only because Mark puts it in such honest terms.<sup>4</sup> He tells us what the sin was in its

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<sup>4</sup> We should also understand that the quest for greatness that exists in every person was much more out in the open in that culture than it is in ours. In eastern cultures in general, honor is a very big deal. And in first century Israel no matter where you went—law courts, meals, social events, worship services, where you sat in the synagogue or at a table, the way you were addressed—

unveiled, ugly form, and we're not used to that because when we do it, we camouflage it. And I'm sure they did too while it was happening. I don't know what comes to your mind when you read about the disciples arguing who is greatest. I don't think they were saying, "I'm greater than you." "No, I'm greater than you ..." "Are not!" "Am so!?" They were immature, but they weren't second graders. I'm sure it was a little more sophisticated than that. There are lots of subtle ways you can argue for your own greatness that don't sound like that's what you're doing.

### ***How to Obtain Earthly Greatness***

I mentioned they had a definition of greatness in their minds. That definition—their standard for what constitutes greatness—involved elevating themselves above the others. That's why they were arguing over who was the greatest—each one was making a case for how he was greater than the other 11. That's the normal, human way of defining greatness. I think it might have been C.S. Lewis who pointed out that no girl is proud of being pretty; she's proud of being prettier than other girls. If you tell your daughter, "You're not half as pretty as the other girls in your class, but you're still a pretty girl," that is not going to make her feel good. No one is proud of being strong or smart; they are proud of being stronger or smarter than others. Line up all the people in your field in order of how successful they are. You look at the people in front of you in line—those guys who are younger than you and they have achieved far more, how does that make you feel? Not great, right? And to get relief we turn around and look at all those people behind us in line. *Oh, I've done much better than all of them*—now you're back to feeling good about yourself.

### ***Pressing Others Down***

And how do you move up in line? You can try to make yourself more impressive, or, the easier way—just make the people ahead of you look less impressive. Everyone has flaws, so all you have to do is find one of them and draw attention to it. That knocks them down a peg or two and now you're the greatest.

That's the preferred way most people seek greatness, because if you try to point to your own greatness, you might sound egotistical. But if you tear other people down, you just sound like everyone else.

And one of the subtlest ways we put others down is by pointing out all the advantages they had. "He's only doing so well because he started out with money, or he had this good fortune or that lucky break. If I had those things, I'd be doing at least as well as him." When we do that we're saying, "He doesn't deserve credit for what he's accomplished. I deserve credit because I could accomplish it if I had what he has."

Is it any big shock to imagine the disciples having thoughts like that? Think about it. Three of them had just been chosen, again, for something special and the others left behind—where they suffered a humiliating public failure. How would that make you feel? And do you think those feelings might come out in your conversations? Especially in moments when one of them is getting on your nerves, which is inevitable when you're living together.

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your ranking in the social order was on display everywhere. In the Qumran community, where they found the dead sea scrolls, once a year, every single person in the whole community was ranked according to their worthiness (Hurtado, 153).

And if you watch for it, you'll see this high valuing of honor all over the place in the Bible. Remember, Jesus gave the advice—it's better to sit in the low spot at a meal and get moved up than to take too high a seat and get moved down. We go to a meal and there might be one guest of honor, or a head table, but other than that, everyone just sits wherever. Not back then. Where you sat reflected your greatness, and being moved up or down was an issue of honor or dishonor. The Pharisees wanted to be called Rabi. They loved to sit in the highest seat. And it was believed that all those rankings were preparation for the eternal order in heaven, so wherever you fell in that ranking system is where you would be forever (Edwards, 286).

And Jesus has been talking about his departure. They aren't sure what to make of that, but if he's leaving for a bit—who's going to take the lead among the Twelve? Probably not the ones who failed so miserably and so publicly with that demon, right? That's what Peter, James, and John are thinking.

Peter says, "Honestly, I'm surprised you guys couldn't drive that demon out. Here, let me give you some advice. If I had been here, here's what I would have done ..."

"Yeah, well, you weren't here, were you Peter? Here we are working hard, doing ministry while you guys are up on that mountain. What were you doing up there anyway?"

"Oh, we're not allowed to tell you that—Jesus told us not to. Sorry. It's need to know. We saw heavenly glory—but I can't talk about it. He was glowing—not going to say anything else, but there may or may not have been appearances of some of the greatest men in the Old Testament—I can't confirm or deny. I don't know when the last time God spoke to you out of a cloud, but like I say, we're sworn to silence."

"Sounds amazing Peter. Hey, when you were up there with Jesus, did you try rebuking him again? That was classic. I'll never forget the look on your face when he called you Satan. I don't think your reputation is ever going to recover from that one Peter. You think you're going to take the lead when Jesus is gone? Right. I can see it now—churches will be named after you. 'Satan Peter's Cathedral.'"

"You don't have to keep bringing that up, Philip. I learned my lesson."

"Oh really? Look me in the eye and tell me you didn't say something stupid when you were up there on the mountain. You did, didn't you? I knew it!"

It could have been something like that. Or, maybe it wasn't a group discussion. I think it's more likely they were walking in groups of 2 or 3 talking about the other groups. It's so easy to tear others down when they aren't part of the conversation.

The point is, they were just doing what we all do. They only reason we're shocked by it is because Mark doesn't sugar coat it. We would be just as appalled if someone took our sins and put them in biblical language.

### ***The Disciples' Honesty***

The only difference between us and the disciples is when they were asked about it, they all immediately realized it was wrong because they were honest men. They didn't try to justify it. Once it was exposed, they just shut their mouths. Say what you will about the disciples—at least they were honest men.

And that's what Jesus wanted. He didn't need a bunch of rocket scientists. Their role was to serve as witnesses to what they had seen and heard. So they could have all kinds of flaws, but the one virtue that was essential was honesty.

And you'll notice, of all the massive flaws they had, dishonesty wasn't one of them. That's the only way we know about all their sinful motives and failures. If you didn't know better, when you read the gospels you might think they were written by someone who hated the disciples. It sounds like anti-disciple propaganda. Weak faith, little faith, hard hearts, deaf, blind, ignorant, foolish, stubborn—and now we see all that is caused by prideful, arrogant megalomania.

Were these stories written by disciple haters? No, it was written by *them*! The only way we know about all their flaws and stupidity and hardness of heart and unbelief and failure is from their own reports. How often do you read an autobiography and the person is portrayed as the worst character in the book? That's one reason why even secular, non-Christian historians place so much credence in their writings. Even the critics of the NT admit the disciples were incredibly honest men.

Half the reason we're so astonished at their sins is because we're not honest about our own. All Jesus had to do was ask, "What were you talking about?" and they immediately knew they were wrong and were too ashamed to speak. But we fight for our greatness and go happily on our way without a single pang of conscience. *Who, me? Seeking greatness? Never! I'm ten times more humble than these egomaniacs I'm surrounded with.* We seek greatness even in our denial of seeking greatness.

How many times would we be caught if Jesus asked us, “What was that conversation about that you just had?” How many times a day would we be caught pursuing self-exaltation if Jesus said, “What were you thinking about just now?” “Why are you savoring and replaying that moment when everyone laughed at your joke?” And before you have a chance to answer, Mark chimes in and gives the true answer in honest terms: “He was replaying that moment because his soul is oriented toward self-exaltation and enjoying his own greatness in the eyes of men.” And then he writes that in the Bible for everyone to see forever. (I’m so glad I’m not in the Bible.)

What if Jesus asked you, “Why are you thinking about a previous conversation and thinking, *I should have said this?*” And Mark pipes in, “Because he would have looked greater in people’s eyes if he had said those things.” What if Jesus asked, “Why were you so mortified when you tripped and fell in front of the whole crowd and everyone laughed? Did that put a dent in your greatness in their eyes?” Or how about this: Why do you sometimes say or think this statement: “I knew that”? If we don’t think we are exactly like the Twelve when it comes to self-exaltation, it’s only because they were honest and we’re still stuck in our own delusions. We have delusions of not having delusions of grandeur.

### ***Arguments***

When a husband and wife get in an argument, what’s happening? Nine times out of ten, when you peel away all the surface issues, it’s really just two people arguing about who is the greatest. “You never listen to me.” “You mistreated me.” “You expect me to clean up your messes.” “You treat me like a child.” What is all that? “You’re not treating me according to my greatness.” For some couples, their entire marriage is nothing but one, giant battle for supremacy.

How many times does a couple get into a huge fight and they can’t even remember what started it? Or you ask them and they say, “Oh, it was so stupid,” and it was some minor little thing? Someone didn’t take the trash out, a facial expression, a tone of voice, whatever—if it’s so small, why did it set you off? Because it was a strike against your greatness. We have a higher view of our own greatness than the other person’s greatness, and the argument is an effort to get on top where we belong.

### ***Sadness Over Other’s Successes***

If you doubt whether you’re on a quest for earthly greatness, just listen to the rhetoric that goes through your mind when people outshine you. Just look at the emotions you have and tell me you’re not wondering who is the greatest. What happens when someone is chosen for a promotion ahead of you? Or what about in church, when someone else is chosen for a ministry that you want? Why were they chosen? What’s wrong with me? I have more experience. That person has this flaw and that flaw . . . If you’re a mother and you see some woman who is a perfect mother—she has everything together, her kids are perfect, her house is immaculate, and something in you wants to hate her. And you’re searching for flaws. The reason you feel the pain you’re feeling is it’s a blow to your greatness.

### ***Superiority Complex***

What about when someone does something really dumb on the highway? Listen to your thoughts at that moment and tell me you don’t have an attitude of considering yourself greater than that moron. I can tell you just in the category of turn signal use alone there is enough attitude of superiority in my heart to sink a ship.

### ***Seeking human applause***

Why does it feel so good when you’ve had a debate and afterward you are proved right? Why is it so thrilling to overhear someone talking about you and they don’t know you’re listening and they say, “She is so amazing! I don’t know how she does it?” How many times will you replay that in your mind?

We look down on the disciples for having this argument, and our whole life is one big argument over who is the greatest. And it's ironic that pastors are so outraged by the disciples here, because pastors are the worst when it comes to this. A pastor sees a younger pastor whose church is growing way more than his, or he's getting asked to speak at big, national events and no one ever calls me to speak. Or you just preach a sermon and no one likes it, and the level of depression is way out of proportion. Pastors are some of the worst offenders.

## Solution: True Greatness

### The Goodness of Greatness

Okay, so self-exaltation is a huge problem. How does Jesus deal with this problem? They can't make heads or tails out of what he's saying because of their focus on their own greatness—so what does Jesus do? Lately Jesus has given them some blistering rebukes; does he give another one here? Is he like all the preachers I heard: "I can't believe you men are so prideful and immature! You shouldn't be seeking greatness. Just be content to be ordinary." No. As usual, Jesus does the exact opposite of what we expect. Look at verse 35.

#### 35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve

That's the posture of official rabbinic teaching, and calling the Twelve is always a big deal in Mark. This is a formal lesson, a serious matter, he summons the Apostles and says, "I'm going to teach you guys something especially important." 35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first And then he goes on to give them a lesson on how to be first!<sup>5</sup> Instead of rebuking them he says, "You guys want to pursue your own greatness? Good for you. Go for it. In fact, let me give you some tips on how to succeed. Your pursuit of greatness is right on, but you're doing it wrong. Let me show you how you can *really* be great."

Does that surprise you? The word "greatest" in v.34 means just what you think: *eminent, important, extraordinary, outstanding, mighty possessing power, rank, or dignity*. The word Jesus uses in v.35, first, means *first in rank or value, foremost, chief, most important*. That's what each of the disciples was trying to attain, and Jesus says, "Here, let me help you." Is Jesus being sarcastic? No. He's serious. Go ahead and pursue greatness because greatness is good. In fact, it's great.

God designed us for greatness. Look at page 1 of the Bible and you see mankind as the crowning glory of the entire creation. How often do you hear someone say, "I just want to make a difference"? Why is every human being like that, and no animal is like that? Your dog doesn't care about making a difference. No cat ever has a midlife crisis because he hasn't accomplished as much as he had hoped. Your hamster doesn't wonder if other hamsters will miss him when he's gone. Why is it that no human being wants to lie on his deathbed saying, "Well, my life was completely inconsequential. Nothing I did mattered"? The reason we are all like that is God designed us to crave greatness. And he wants us to pursue it.

**Matthew 5:19** *Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

That's the goal Jesus wants us to aspire to.

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<sup>5</sup> This is just like the paradox he gave us in ch.8 about life (to save your life you must lose it). Jesus says to be first you must be last. In both cases, he doesn't call us to abandon the question, only to seek it the right way. The objective is still saving your life and being great.

Raise your hand if you want to someday hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” That’s a desire for honor. It’s a quest for the greatest kind of greatness. Seeking greatness is a good thing, and Jesus endorses that here by giving us a lesson on how to achieve it.

## **The World’s Standard: Being Above Others**

So if all that is the case, what was wrong with what the disciples were doing? Their problem wasn’t that they were seeking greatness, but rather how they were defining it. And here’s the key: your definition of greatness is all about whose opinion you care about. Greatness is always a function of someone thinking of you as great. No one is great in a closet. Greatness is bestowed on you by others, and the question that reveals what kind of person you are is this: from whom do you seek honor? Whose respect do you crave? The honor you receive means only as much to you as the ones giving you that honor. If I got some kind of honorary award from Antifa or Planned Parenthood, not only would I not feel honored; I’d be ashamed. Everyone is going to seek greatness, and they are going to seek it in the eyes of whoever matters most to them. And the huge question in life at every moment is this: Whose opinion of you matters to you the most?

The disciples’ problem wasn’t that they were seeking greatness; it’s that they were seeking greatness in the eyes of the other disciples. That’s the whole point of having an argument. They were each trying to make a case to persuade the others of their greatness.

That’s the world’s standard—you’re great when people think you’re great. That’s why the nerds hang out with the other nerds. We all gravitate away from groups that look down on us and toward groups that hold us in high esteem, because our standard for greatness is what the people around us think of us.

That’s the world’s idea of greatness, and so often we fall into thinking the same way in the church. Who is treated as great in the Christian world? The celebrities, the ones who write the bestselling books, the ones whose songs are on the radio, the preachers who speak at the big conferences or get interviewed on TV by some big name in the secular world. It’s exactly the same standard for greatness that the world has.

## **The True Standard**

That’s the wrong standard; what’s the true standard? Someone once asked Burt Reynolds when a boy becomes a man. His answer was, “You’re a man when your daddy says you’re a man.” I don’t know if that’s true about manhood, but I can say this about greatness: You are great when Jesus says you are great. Will everyone agree with that? You’re great when God says your great and not before. Earthly greatness is when you are highly esteemed by men. True greatness is when you are highly esteemed by God. And the big question in life is, whose honor do you seek? Paul said it about as clearly as you can say it in Galatians 1.

**Galatians 1:10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.**

It can’t be both. To seek one requires forfeiting the other.

## **How to Become Great**

Do you want to be one of the greats? I hope so. And it’s not too late. Jesus teaches us exactly how to attain it in v.35. And it has nothing to do with your accomplishments. It’s not a function of how many people you’ve led to Christ. It’s not an issue of kingdom productivity or how fruitful your ministry is.

**35 ... "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."**

**Very last**—Step one is you have to come in dead last in social ranking. Then you become everybody’s servant.



## *The Child*

And to drive the point home, Jesus uses an object lesson. He's going to give them a model for greatness. And it's the last person in the room anyone would have expected as a model.

### **36 He took a little child**

This is a child old enough to stand but little enough for Jesus to hold in his arms, so I'm picturing maybe a 2 or 3 year old. And everyone focuses on Jesus taking this child in his arms and holding him (or her). That's beautiful, and we'll talk about that next time, but for tonight let's pay attention to something that's easy to miss—namely, what Jesus did right before picking the child up.

### **36 He took a little child and had the child stand among them.<sup>6</sup>**

Jesus calls this little kid, "Hey, Tabi, come on over here." The girl looks up at her mom, mom nods, and the girl smiles and comes over to Jesus. Then he positions her next to the disciples and then stands back and folds his arms. It's a silent parable.

Remember, the topic of discussion is, "Who among us is the greatest?" And Jesus gave the definitive standard: it's the one who is dead last in social ranking and the servant of all. So you have 13 people standing there—12 grown men who have been performing miracles, driving out demons, raising the dead; men who had left everything to follow Jesus. And a little toddler. Out of the 13, who is dead last socially? Who is the servant of all? A child has to do whatever any adult around him says to do—or any other kid who is bigger than him for that matter. In fact, In Aramaic, the word for child and the word for servant are the same word. And there's no question the kid was dead last in the social ranking of the day.

## **Children Were Lowly**

This is a little hard for us to appreciate because in our culture, children are much more highly valued than they were in that culture. In our culture, most families are child-centered—everything revolves around the children. And our whole culture caters to children—Disneyland and Pixar and everything else. As Kevin DeYoung says, it's not patriarchy, it's not matriarchy, it's kindergarchy. In our culture we tend to make much of children and neglect the elderly. In that culture it was exactly the opposite. They had high regard for the aged, but children had no honor, no power, no status, no rights and their opinions were of no value.

In Matthew's account we find out it wasn't a totally silent parable.

**Matthew 18:2 He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**

So the purpose of standing the child among them was to show them the standard for greatness. Matthew tells us that, but Mark just uses his paintbrush and shows us.

So that illustration was more striking in that culture than in ours because of their low view of children, but still, even in our culture it packs a pretty good punch, because no one likes being treated like a child. How do you feel when someone talks to you like a child? How would you like to walk up to the counter at Taco Bell and be completely ignored and then have an adult walk up and get served immediately? How would you like it if whenever you made a serious comment, the people around you either laughed or ignored it altogether? How much do you enjoy it when your spouse starts ordering you around like a child or people at work talk down to you like a child? When things like that happen, what

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<sup>6</sup> All three Gospel accounts of this event mention the fact that Jesus first had the kid stand there with the Twelve.

goes on in your emotions? Do you respond like someone who wants to be regarded as great in the eyes of men, or great in the eyes of God?

## **Do We Believe This?**

Last Sunday I went down to visit Bob. I had been studying this passage, and so it was in my mind. Jesus said to be the greatest, one must be dead last on the social scale and serve everyone around him. I looked at Bob and thought, who could possibly be lower socially than him? I don't think there is anyone more despised by our culture than convicts in prison—especially ones with his crime. And not only are prisoners at the bottom of our society, but Bob is at the bottom of the totem pole within the prison. He doesn't have any tatoos, he's not muscular, no fighting skill, no gang affiliation—nothing that would garner him any respect from the other inmates. He is at the bottom of the bottom of the bottom. Most people feel justified in hating him even within the church. And what does he do all day every day? Serves. Needy, broken, outcast men are drawn to him like a magnet and he pours himself out to minister to those men.

So from an external point of view, no one fits the description of greatness that Jesus gave better than Bob. And as I sat there and looked across the table at him, this thoroughly broken man, and thought, This is what Jesus wants me to aspire to? I realized just how easy it is to read a passage like this and say amen and have no concept what you're saying amen to.

## **Self-Exaltation Causes Blindness on the Topic of Self-Denial**

And if we seek true greatness, and we seek it the way Jesus taught us here, not only will we become great in God's eyes and hear that "Well done," but it will also cure the disease that causes blindness and deafness whenever Jesus calls us to discipleship. If you're seeking greatness in the eyes of men, humiliation and rejection and suffering and lowliness are a non-starter. But if you're seeking greatness by coming in dead last socially and being everyone's servant, you have ears to hear when Jesus calls you to follow him in the path of suffering.

## **Watch For It**

I would urge you to begin a practice of watching for this in your own heart—watch for instances of a superiority attitude. Watch for patterns of thinking that have no other purpose than to strategize the pursuit of earthly greatness—being looked up to by others rather than being esteemed highly by God. I really didn't think I had that much of a problem with seeking earthly greatness instead of seeking greatness in God's eyes, but doing this study really opened my eyes.

## **Use Your Drive for Greatness**

But when you see those examples of self-exaltation, don't get depressed or beat up on yourself. Use those desires strategically. God planted within you a drive to achieve greatness. So use that to motivate yourself to pursue true greatness. Earlier in the message when I was giving all the examples of how we seek earthly greatness, think of all the points where you got dinged. Instead of getting discouraged, use it to your advantage. Let all your appetites for greatness push you toward humility, lowliness, and servanthood.

Are you afraid your life is ruined or wasted? Just serve. Do you want to make a difference? Be everyone's servant. Do you want to have an impact, not to have a wasted, meaningless life? Humble yourself and look for every opportunity to serve people. Do you have a desire for your efforts and work to be successful rather than a failure? Serve. Do you want to have a great career? Do any job and be a servant to your coworkers. Do you have a desire to hear God say, "Well done"? Be a servant.

## Summary

As soon as Jesus asked what they were discussing, they knew their self-exaltation was wrong. We all strive for self-exaltation in many ways, but we hide it. The solution is a surprise. Seeking greatness is actually a good thing, but we must seek it in the eyes of God, not men. And that is done through self-denial. When we focus on self-exaltation, we become deaf to calls to discipleship because they require self-denial. We must become like those at the bottom of the social scale and the servant of all (like children, or convicts). That is the path to greatness.