

If Anyone Would Be First, He Must Be Last Of All

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning. Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel according to Mark 9, verses 30 to 50, as printed in your liturgy.

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 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. But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, What were you arguing about on the road?

But they kept quiet, because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the twelve disciples and said, Anyone who wants to be first must be very last.

[1 : 28] And the servant of all. He took a little child, whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 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.

Teacher, said John, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said.

For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me. For whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name, because you belong to the Messiah, will certainly not lose their reward.

If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck, and they were thrown into the sea.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.

[2 : 38] And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out.

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where the worms that eat them do not die and the fire is not quenched.

Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves and be at peace with each other.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ. One, two, good. Thank you. Thanks, Johnson Hess, for that reading. And good morning, everyone.

You know, this passage is pretty difficult for me this week, this passage in particular. And usually what I do when I encounter a difficult passage like this is I just look up what Tim Keller had to say about it.

[3 : 41] But I realized when I went on the Redeemer Presbyterian Church website is that Tim Keller actually never preached this text, ever. He had his associate pastor preach it.

All right? So, Jonathan, you're in good company, and I'm going to do my best to get us through this. It's a pretty difficult text. Let's pray as we go to God's Word. Father, as we sing, speak, O Lord.

Speak, O Lord, until your church is built and the earth is filled with your glory, the glory of Jesus Christ. Would we behold him this morning in Jesus' name? Amen.

Amen. So, if you can, I want you to try to think back. If you can remember the first time in your life that you thought to yourself, I want to be great at, like, fill in the blank.

I want to be great at fill in the blank. For me, I can remember pretty far back, probably the first time I had this thought. You know, I was a typical kid born in the 80s, so karate was a big deal. I remember thinking to myself, I want to be a great martial artist.

[4 : 45] I want to be the next Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, just like a great fighting machine, all right? And that was realized, right? Then in third grade, you know, I started getting hoop dreams, and I wanted to be a great basketball player.

I wanted to be the first Chinese American in the NBA. I would ask my parents, you know, hey, my Asian parents, by the way, hey, if, you know, I got drafted into the NBA out of high school, would you let me skip college? And my pursuit of greatness continued through college and even in seminary, but, you know, hopefully a little bit more sanctified.

I wanted to be a great preacher. I wanted to be a great pastor, a theologian. I'd say things like, I want to be the Asian American Tim Keller. And, yeah, just a great leader in the church.

I pretty much for my whole life have wanted to be great at something. And I bet it's the same for each of us, right? For each of you, I imagine we all want to be great in this room at something. Great sons, daughters, spouses, partners, students, attorneys, engineers, developers, investors, teachers, you name it. We all want to be great. And this is good.

[5 : 52] And this is natural. I wouldn't tell any of you to stop pursuing greatness. In fact, people, creatures who are made in the image of God should pursue greatness. Well, the question isn't so much whether or not we should pursue greatness.

A question Jesus confronts us with today is what kind of greatness? What kind of greatness are we pursuing and how are we pursuing it? We have to consider these questions because, you know, if we don't pause to think deeply about our world and our lives and just what this is all for, what ends up happening is we'll take for granted what greatness even is.

We'll just kind of let some default picture of greatness that this broken world gives to us, we'll let it just lodge itself into our heads and our hearts, and we'll just kind of run with this picture and let it shape us even more than we realize.

Maybe it's a picture of financial security and abundance, physical strength and health and energy. Maybe your idea of greatness is embodied in some hotshot CEO or the smartest, most talented person that you could possibly imagine.

Maybe if you're a student, maybe a little bit more short term, maybe your image of what it means to be great is to be that Regent Scholar EECS major, right, who's already getting offers from tech companies even now before the semester's over.

[7 : 10] Or for me, the picture of greatness that I often find myself pursuing is like a mixture, somewhere between Tim Keller and Steph Curry, like if I could get those things, that's greatness, right? But whatever picture of greatness we have in our heads, what I'm saying is it's so easy for us to just kind of uncritically pursue that image.

It's so easy to become disciples of whomever we consider to be the goat, right, the greatest of all time. So another question that this boils down to is not just how do we become great, but who is the goat?

Who is the greatest of all time? That's really the ultimate question. And, you know, I know I'm in a church, right? This is a room full of Christians. You all know the Sunday school answer, the right answer. Jesus is the goat, right?

But honestly, do our lives reflect our confession that Jesus is the greatest of all time? In the many moments when we find ourselves hurried and anxious and bitter, prideful and self-righteous, lazy and apathetic, enslaved to our addictions, unwilling to forgive and bitter, do our lives match our lips when we say that Jesus is the goat?

So you see, how we live and how we interact with this world and the people in it, that is the truest reflection of whom we believe to be the greatest. And I think if we're honest with ourselves, even and especially us Christians in the room, we don't always believe that Jesus is the goat.

[8 : 40] And we choose to live differently than him because we'd rather pursue other kinds, other images of greatness that we find honestly more compelling sometimes than Jesus. And this has been the story, right, of sinful humanity ever since Adam and Eve presumed that they could be the goats themselves, right?

A whole history of confusion has entered into our world concerning who truly is the greatest of all time and what does that look like? Adam and Eve's firstborn son, Cain, right, he pursued greatness

how?

By murdering his brother, Abel, out of jealousy and out of a sense of inferiority. And then his descendants pursued greatness by, you know, through brute power, through self-interest and self-protection.

They built these cities and they built it on the violent principle of might makes right. And even today, all of us, just like the builders of Babel, right, we followed in a similar pattern ourselves.

All of us, we're all building our own towers. We're all trying to make names for ourselves. All of us trying to achieve greatness. We try to build temples and towers and staircases into whatever we believe heaven to be, right, so that we might achieve our highest ambitions and walk amongst whoever we believe the gods to be.

[9 : 51] Who are the gods in your life? Are they the executives in your corporate boardrooms? Are they the politicians and the policymakers and the market movers in Washington and on Wall Street?

Or even for the students here, the middle schoolers, the high schoolers, are the gods and goddesses who rule your life, are they the most popular kids in your classes? We're all building towers.

We're all trying to make a name for ourselves to get on a certain level, right, that level of greatness, maybe even godlike status. And we're all trying to make a name for ourselves to win approval, right, from our peers, from our parents, from the public in general.

Because then and only then, right, can our greatness be confirmed. Then and only then can we say that we matter and that our existence has been worth something to this world. But in all our various pursuits of greatness, in all our tower building, in all our name-making activity, how many of us have arrived?

And if not, are we even so sure that we've been pursuing true greatness at all? Like what fruit have we yielded from all of our tower building and name-making? You know, in Genesis chapter 11, that's the account of the Tower of Babel, there's this one verse that details how they used bricks to build that tower.

[11 : 10] And if you were a Jewish reader of that story, based on your own people's personal history, you would most definitely know what kind of oppression and slavery and forced human labor went into ancient Near Eastern brick-making.

And you know, that tower that the builders of Babel built, it probably was a great tower. Probably the greatest that the world had ever seen, and maybe some of us feel like we are pretty close as well to achieving our greatness with our towers, with making a name for ourselves.

But my question is, at what cost? And at whose expense? See, the bricks we build our greatness upon, they don't just come from nowhere. Might there be more blood and violence on our hands than we realize when we uncritically pursue the kinds of greatness that the world most often commends to us?

Like, might it be that our drive to fulfill our ambitions has mostly just led to a culture of violent competition? And might it be that our desire for approval has mostly just led to a culture of vain celebrity?

What I'm trying to suggest this morning is that the world's gone wrong. It's gone violent. It's gone vain. And largely because we've misdefined true greatness and misidentified the goat.

[12 : 27] We've misdefined true greatness because we've misidentified the goat. And what we're going to see in our passage this morning is that even Jesus' closest 12 companions, the disciples themselves, the apostles on whom he built his church, even they fell prey to this common yet critical error of misdefining true greatness and misidentifying the goat.

Now let's pick up in the beginning at verse 30. It says, They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were 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. But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, What were you arguing about on the road?

But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Just to give you a little bit of background on what happened right before this text, remember again, three of Jesus' disciples had just come down from seeing his glory and hearing the voice of God on the Mount of Transfiguration.

And then they and Jesus, after coming down from the mountain, they find that the other nine disciples are not able to cast out a particular demon out of a little boy. So Jesus casts it out, and now they're on their way again.

[13 : 45] Right? They're on their way again. Again, Jesus is trying to keep a low profile because he wants to focus on his disciples who clearly have a lot to learn and understand. And what he teaches them is something he's taught them before, many times before, something they really, really, really need to understand, is that he, the Son of Man, is going to be delivered, killed, but then also rise again.

And at this point, it still hasn't hit the disciples, and verse 32 says that they still do not understand. They're even afraid to ask him about it. Now, to be fair to the disciples, you know, the prophet Daniel, in Daniel chapter 7, had foretold that the Son of Man would be a figure of, like, incredible greatness.

He would be endowed with authority and glory and sovereign power and everlasting dominion. But, you know, the problem was that the disciples, they had a limited vision of how such a great, glorious, sovereign Son of Man might choose to exercise his authority and power.

They couldn't see it. They couldn't see a Son of Man other than the one that they had in their minds, which wasn't the Son of Man that Jesus came to be. Now, we're not told exactly what their definition of greatness was, but I want to point out some clues here indicating to us just the image of greatness upon their minds.

So, first of all, they had no idea how the greatness of the Son of Man might actually hinge on his death and resurrection. For them, greatness precluded death. It precluded suffering. And like, you know, being delivered over into the hands of someone else, that was incompatible with being great.

[15 : 22] For them, greatness meant being invulnerable, meant being invincible, victorious. And then also notice that their idea of greatness is actually pretty relative.

Like, it's far from unanimous. It's actually super contested. Look at verse 34. It says that they were arguing, right? They were arguing about who was the greatest. Now, think about that for a second. If you have to argue about something, if someone truly was the greatest, wouldn't it be self-evident? Wouldn't it be just absolutely closed for debate? Just like, you know, Steph Curry, the greatest shooter of all time. Case closed, right? End of discussion. And yet, they were debating who was the greatest.

But really, if you have to debate, again, who the greatest is, whatever answer you're going to come up with, it's probably going to be wrong. If someone is truly the goat, they won't need to make a case for themselves.

They won't need to say a thing to promote themselves because everyone will already know. But that is definitely not the case here for these disciples. Why? Because their notions of greatness are scattered.

[16 : 24] They're divided, and thus they are relativized. And then also notice what their idea of greatness leads to. It entails that each of them needs to elevate themselves up against each other, and even put each other down.

Like their notion of greatness, it inherently puts them in competition with each other. It's a greatness that creates selfish rivalry. A greatness that plants within their hearts a desire for supremacy.

A desire that their peers be inferior to them. So to summarize, in the disciples' minds, greatness was one, incompatible with suffering and vulnerability. Two, relativized, contested, and far from unanimous.

And three, it also led to competition rather than camaraderie and compassion. And my question for us, before any of us pick up our first stone to cast at these disciples, is are we not pursuing similar kinds of greatnesses?

With the towers we're trying to build, with the names we're trying to make for ourselves. Don't we all also tend to separate a life of greatness from a life of grief?

[17 : 37] Don't we all tend to equate greatness with being invulnerable, invincible, immovable? Who of us naturally points to the poor and to the sick and to the weak and the oppressed and says to ourselves, these are the great ones and I want to follow them so I can be just like them?

None of us says that. None of us. Let's be honest. We all know Jeff Bezos' name. We all know Joe Biden's name. And we'd rather have their lives and sit in their seats than that of the people we saw pushing carts down the street on our way to church.

Or the people standing in line at the food bank, right? Or the almost two million Palestinians who find themselves on the opposite side of violent power. We don't want to be on that side. We don't want that. We're all complicit with the disciples' destructive understanding of greatness. And I mean, aren't the kinds of greatness we're pursuing actually, though, way more flimsy and relative and unsubstantiated than we care to admit, though? That's the thing about this. We're all arguing for days and days about who is the greatest and what the standards are. And none of us can convince the other. All of our pursuits of greatness never get to that level.

[18 : 51] We never make it. Where are we? Excuse me. Where we are? We never get to that status where we are crowned as the goat. No, we just grind and grind and grind, hustle and hustle all the way to the end.

And at best, we only ever achieve a relative greatness. Our kids might say we're the best parents in the world, but not all kids, right? Our companies might say we're the employee of the month or of the year, but not every time.

None of us ever arrives at ultimate greatness. And this only makes us more competitive and less compassionate. I see this on the basketball court all the time.

Pick up basketball, guys out there trying to prove their worth and their existence to each other and to themselves. And then what happens is that, of course, our pursuit of this kind of greatness leads to ruthless competition rather than, you know, righteousness and compassion.

And then middle-aged men go way too hard at each other. And grown men make fools of themselves, lose their cool, and often get hurt. And all of a sudden, something that was meant to be fun and for exercise becomes a battleground where you leave the court either puffed up or damaged in your ego, right?

[20 : 06] And you all know that this isn't just something that happens on the basketball court, right? It happens everywhere where people with sinful natures have to interact with each other.

And so, ironically, this world is actually made worse when people pursue the kind of greatness that these disciples were after. And we all know it.

The disciples themselves knew it. That's why they kept silent in verse 34 when Jesus asked them what they were talking about. Even as they were arguing with each other about who was the greatest, deep down they knew that their pursuits of greatness were wrong and bad for the world, even as they continued to pursue that kind of greatness.

But you know what? The beauty of the gospel is that while sinful humanity has pretty much spent all of history, all of us trying to be some kind of goat on our own terms, and while this has only left us weary and anxious and disappointed and divided, the true goat the Scriptures teach us, the true goat has come to show us a better and more ultimate greatness.

Here in the rest of the passage, Jesus radically redefines greatness. And for the sake of time, because I've used like two-thirds of my time already, I just want to briefly point out to you from this text three ways which Jesus redefines greatness.

[21 : 27] First, true greatness chooses service over supremacy. Second, greatness chooses reception, being receptive over rivalry. And third, greatness chooses sacrifices over stumbling blocks.

All right, so first, true greatness chooses service over supremacy. Look what Jesus says in verse 35. Sitting down, Jesus called the twelve and said, anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all.

So, whereas the world says that the first shall be first and the last shall be last, Jesus turns this logic completely upside down. Jesus says that the greatest, the one who is truly first, is not the one who owns the servants, but the one who is a servant, and specifically a servant of all, he says.

And why? Well, he says because to serve, to serve even and especially the lowliest of people, even that insignificant child that was in his lap, who took up way more resources than he produced, and was uneducated and a liability, sometimes annoying and disobedient and troublesome, to serve and to welcome the lowest and most insignificant, Jesus says, is to welcome him and the one who sent him.

To be a servant to even the lowliest is to welcome God himself, according to Jesus. And that is where greatness comes from, not from accomplishing our ambitions or satisfying our appetites or winning people's approval through our tireless tower building and name making, but from the presence of God in our lives.

[23 : 04] When we serve, and particularly when we serve the ones the world discards as worthless, that is precisely where we are serving and welcoming God into our lives and experiencing his presence.

This is why we have our loaves and fishes ministry to our houseless neighbors. This is why we help to establish that development center in Guatemala and why we support, you know, 70 of us support children there.

This is why our elders, Bill and Jesus, go to visit men and spend time with them in San Quentin, not simply or even primarily to relieve hunger or educate Guatemalans or provide some company to lonely men in prison.

Bill and Jesus go to San Quentin to experience the presence of God. Our other elder, Karen, she's experienced God on her own trips, on her Compassion International trips.

They don't go out of duty or pity. They go to encounter God. That's why we serve. And see, this is true greatness, Jesus says, choosing service over supremacy.

[24 : 11] Because when we become the last of all and serve, we welcome and experience God himself. We dive deeper into the heart of God, the one who said, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

Now, the second way Jesus redefines greatness is by saying that true greatness chooses reception over rivalry. And we see that here starting in verse 38. So right after Jesus commends them to be servants who welcome the least of the least, John, his beloved disciple, for some reason, thinks it's a good idea to tell Jesus how they didn't welcome someone recently.

He tells Jesus about this guy who was casting out demons. And this is meant to be ironic because remember last week, what was it the disciples failed to do? They failed to cast out demons because of their prayerlessness and their faithlessness.

And yet here they are boasting to Jesus about how they told some other guy who was able to cast out demons to stop. And for what reason? Verse 38 says, because he was not one of us.

So first they are arguing about who is the greatest, and now these disciples who themselves had trouble casting out demons, they have the audacity to boast about telling someone else to stop doing the good thing that they failed to do just because this guy wasn't part of their crew.

[25 : 31] Perhaps the disciples were jealous, or perhaps the disciples thought that only they were worthy of doing good as representatives of Jesus. But see, their misunderstanding of greatness, what happened because of it?

Because they misunderstood greatness, they had this rivalry and this competition in their heart toward this guy. It kept them from receiving and welcoming this unnamed man who was clearly on a spiritual journey of his own, but that they could not see.

This was someone who amazingly, even not having had as much exposure to Jesus as the 12, still believed in Jesus and was experiencing his power and his authority. And this power and authority were working in his life in powerful ways over evil.

This was a man who was being drawn into deeper relationship with Christ in spite of the 12, and yet all the 12 could see was that he was not one of them. And they missed out on the great thing that was happening right before their eyes in this man's life.

Because their notion of greatness depended on an us versus them dynamic, and they chose rivalry over receptiveness. And to that, Jesus says, no, you shouldn't have stopped him.

[26 : 41] Jesus would remind us that it's not team disciples versus team other kinds of disciples. It's not team Presbyterians versus team Pentecostals. It's not even team Christians versus team not Christians, the disciples.

Their reference point was themselves, and that was the problem. When the reference point should have been Jesus. And that's always going to be a recipe for violence and evil and disaster.

They drew lines by asking, who is one of us? Rather than drawing just that one line, who is for Jesus? Because see, it's really quite simple. It's just team Jesus versus team Satan, team evil, right?

Jesus says in verse 39, for no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me. For whoever's not against us is for us.

If anyone is combating Satan in Jesus' name, if anyone is dependent upon his power and representing his authority, that person's on team Jesus. The right team, the winning team, even if all they're doing is the menial servant task of serving someone a cup of water, if they're doing it in

the name of Jesus, they are on team Jesus.

[27 : 51] So it's more simple than you make it out to be, Jesus was saying to his disciples and to us. But he says, but you can't see it because you've chosen to pursue a greatness that draws lines upon lines and lines revolving around you rather than pursuing a greatness that draws one single line between me and everything else.

The kind of greatness that this world pursues to its own harm, right? Your pursuit of greatness, Jesus says, only multiplies your rivalries when really true greatness actually receives the many unlikely people around us who we once thought were threats.

It receives a diversity of peoples from every tribe, tongue, nation, culture, socioeconomic status, all united by nothing but King Jesus. Now the third way that Jesus' idea of greatness is redefined is it chooses not just servanthood over supremacy or receptiveness over rivalry, it also chooses sacrifice over stumbling blocks.

And what I mean by this is he impresses upon his disciples here that just as there are only two ultimate teams, team Jesus and team evil, there are also only two ultimate directions.

There are only two directions. You are either going toward him or you're stumbling away from him. And the stakes are high. It's life with Jesus versus death apart from him.

[29 : 19] And so he says, we must do everything in our power to not stumble or be stumbled. Everything we can to not cause others to go into the wrong direction and to not go into the wrong direction ourselves.

For he says, it would be better if a millstone were tied around our neck and we were thrown into the sea and drowned than if we led someone else in the wrong direction away from Jesus. And it would be better to lose a hand or a foot or an eye than for us ourselves to stumble away from Jesus.

In essence, Jesus is calling us to be sacrifices. He's saying that it's better to sacrifice ourselves so that others do not stumble away from Jesus. And it's even better to sacrifice our own body parts that we ourselves might not stumble away from Jesus.

Even if the sacrifice is great, a hand, a foot, an eye, our own souls, or the sacrifice of our whole lives for the sake of others. To sacrifice is better than to stumble is what Jesus says.

And maybe by now you've discerned a pattern, right, with these three redefinitions of greatness. You've discerned this pattern, greatness radically different, right, than the kinds of greatness most of us are used to pursuing in this broken world.

[30 : 35] And you'd be right, there is a pattern. It is radically different. And that's what I think Jesus was getting at here in verses 49 and 50 with these ideas of salt and fire, which is probably the hardest part of this passage for me.

I'm honestly not exactly sure what verse 49 means in particular, and neither do the commentators. But, if we look in other places in the Gospels where Jesus talks about being the salt of the earth, that is being this ordinary yet distinct blessing to the world, just as salt is an ordinary compound, right, that preserves and draws out the flavor of things wherever it is spread, I think when Jesus is talking about salt and fire here and exhorting us to maintain our, like, saltiness, he's calling us to maintain our distinctness, our distinctness as salt, or in other words, to pursue his unique way of greatness, his unique way of servant-heartedness and receptiveness and being sacrificial.

You see, in Jesus' world, the salt that they used was derived from these Dead Sea deposits, right, and while sodium chloride would commonly be a part of these deposits, it was also possible that the sodium chloride could be washed out, leaving the salt without any saltiness.

So I think Jesus was challenging his disciples and us here to not be like the rest of the world, to not lose our distinctiveness, but to hold on to it, a distinctiveness that we get from him, that we get from the goat, the one who showed us that service, receptiveness, and sacrifice are the very way to greatness, even and in spite of death that may come.

This is what he was trying to teach his disciples again and again and again, reminding them that the Son of Man must be delivered over into the hands of his enemies and killed, but also would rise again on the third day.

[32 : 29] And this is what he's trying to teach us. Before the cross, before the resurrection, the disciples, they didn't have eyes to see it, but they surely do now and the question is, do we see it?

Do we see the greatness of Jesus? The greatness of the whole of his life, not just his ascension, not just his resurrection, the greatness of his whole life.

