

# The Pursuit of Greatness

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[0:00] Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. Wonderful to have you.!

Eight more weeks in this church year before the new church year begins at Advent, the first Sunday of December. But we've been going through this year through the Gospel of Mark.

I wonder if this phrase, this quote is familiar to you. Some are born great. Some achieve greatness. And some have greatness. Trust upon them. These timeless words of Shakespeare captures the human spirit, the human pursuit of greatness in its different forms.

Whether it's by achievement, or by the accident of birth, or by the burden of duty placed upon a person. This pursuit builds our thoughts and energies.

[1:24] And there are many ways by which we strive to achieve greatness in the world. But the important question is this. What is greatness? And Jesus answers that question for us.

And it is that answer that Jesus gives that we turn to this morning in our Gospel reading from Mark chapter 9, verse 30 to 37. I invite you to follow along in your Bible, in the Pew Bible.

I think it's on page 1004 of your Pew Bible. Now, where are we in Mark? Where have we gone to so far? Well, Jesus is still on the move with his disciples.

He's heading towards Jerusalem. And he had begun to tell his disciples from chapter 8 onward about what awaited him there in Jerusalem, in that city.

Jesus had been teaching his disciples that of what will happen to him. Of the reason they are living there, leaving their homes in Galilee to travel to Jerusalem.

[2:27] And what's that reason? It's this. As he says to them in verse 30 and 31.

The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. And they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days, he will rise.

Here again, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection by privately teaching the twelve to prepare them for it.

Jesus, of course, has been telling them that the way of the cross, which he is about to trod, is the way of the cross. They will also need to trod.

This is the cost of discipleship. He laid down for us in chapter 8, verse 34 to 37 of Mark. When he says to us, to them and to us, If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[3:36] And whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's sake will save it. And what does the prophet say?

A man. To gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? So Jesus has been teaching along these lines since verse 8 about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

About what it means to follow him. About the path to glory even. In many ways, chapter 9 and 10 demonstrate this call to discipleship.

And what this cruciform, that's cross-shaped discipleship looks like. But we are told in verse 32.

They did not, that is the apostles, the disciples, did not understand the saying.

And were afraid to ask him. They cannot grasp yet that Jesus has come to do the will of his father. Not their will.

[4:43] And what does doing the will of his father requires for Jesus? It requires his death as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world. And it seems the more they ask Jesus about what the next plans are, the more they don't like what Jesus has to say.

And so Mark tells us, they were afraid to ask. They were afraid to ask. This is stubborn fear. This is a refusal to loosen their ears to hear Jesus' words.

Because they do not yet have eyes to see that Jesus' words concerning his death and resurrection are in fact the words of life. It is good news. It is the good news of their salvation. But they can't grasp it yet. And verse 33 to 34 is further proof that they really don't understand what Jesus has been telling them.

About his death in Jerusalem. About the cost of discipleship that they are meant to follow. They don't understand. They haven't grasped it at all. How do we know that?

[5:53] Verse 33 and 34. What were they doing? On the way to Capernaum. And when he was in the house, he asked them. Right? When they got to the home they're staying in.

Jesus asked his disciples. What were you discussing? All on the way. But they kept silent. For on the way. Why did they keep silent?

Because on the way, they were arguing with one another. About who was the greatest. Jesus noticed. Jesus noticed.

They were displeased with each other. He noticed that they were bickering among themselves.

About who was the greatest. You can imagine them. Placing their credentials.

Before each other. Laying it out. As you lay down a card. Peter, James and John, for example.

Probably boasting. That they were the inner circle of the inner circle. People.

[6:48] The others. The other nine, perhaps. Resented this. And tried to pull them down. A peg or two. We're not told exactly how the argument went.

But I'm sure it's not hard for you to imagine. Because in truth. It is the kind of argument. That we all too easily have. Amongst ourselves. In the pursuit of greatness.

What we often do. Is weigh ourselves against others. And how does it go? How does that go? We burnish.

And exalt. Our own credentials. While we seek to tarnish. And reduce. Those of others. My ministry. Or my gifts. Are the best. They're the most vital. For the upkeep of the church. We might say. And the refrain in our heads.

[7:48] Goes something like this. I'm the leading man. Or woman. In this story. And I need you. All of you.

My supporting cast. To know your role. And to play it well. So I. Can shine. Perhaps we don't use those same words.

But. Kind of. In our own minds. At least the worthiness of our world. The worthiness of our heart. Makes us think. In such categories.

Where the star of our own story. Everybody else needs to play their roles. So that we can shine. But Jesus is trying to help us to see that this is the opposite of the example that he himself provides. The way of the cross he has been teaching us and the disciples so far is opposite to this worldly thinking, this worldly pursuit of greatness. And they know that much, I think the disciples at this point, they know that much. And that's why they kept silent. Because they were ashamed, as they should be. To admit to their Lord that they had been arguing with each other about who is the greatest. And the question of who is the greatest is still a constant point of debate today, isn't it? We've even coined an acronym GOAT. Have you heard it before? Greatest of all time. Who is the GOAT?

[9:30] If you follow sports at all, you've definitely heard of that phrase. It's the age-old debate in any sort of sports enterprise about who is the best to have ever played that particular sport. It's not enough to appreciate and acknowledge the expertise and the brilliance of those who are gifted in that particular field of sport. And those who excel at it. It's not enough just to appreciate their excellence and their brilliance. We seek to pitch them against each other. So someone could be the king of the hill. There must be the greatest. We do this. We do this not only in sports, we do it also in almost all facets of life in the world. But such a mentality has no place in the church of Christ. And among the followers of Jesus. It has no place. It's not a question we should be asking in the church of Christ.

I find it interesting. That the Bible. In the Bible. Now this is a bit of a rich. You'll follow along with me. In the Bible. Goats. Are bad. There's an under in the Gospels. Goats are cast out into hell fire. Whereas. It's the sheep. Who are shepherded. Into God's eternal rest. Isn't it?

But no one wants to be a sheep. In the world. Do they? You know anything about sheep. You don't want to be a sheep. That's not what the world strives for. They want to be the goats. But the way of Christ. The way of the cross. Is to strive to be sheep. Going back to what we talked about last week.

To strive to be To strive for simple dependence Upon Christ our Lord And then to follow his example And I notice here There's this wonderful thing That's going on here In this story that Mark gives us Because as they Sort of Sheepishly confess Or at least It's apparent that they know That Jesus knows What they were talking about And they were ashamed about it But what Notice what Jesus does Jesus does not rebuke them For desiring to be great He doesn't rebuke them For desiring to be great

Perhaps Because in striving For excellence The strive for excellence In doing it As image bearers Of our creator We are actually Imaging God who made us The most excellent God The greatest And so to strive for excellence Is not in itself A bad thing And Jesus doesn't Rebuke them for that And here Before them Is the greatest man Who ever lived And he humbly Shows them And us The path To greatness And he said to them If anyone Would be first He must be last And last of all And servant of all Jesus in those words Upends The world's calculations Of what greatness looks like In those words

He says to us And if anyone Will be first He must be last And he must be servant of all You know that runs contrary To our very instinct Doesn't it?

[13:13] To be last Is the last thing we want And yet Jesus says here The way to being first Is the way Of service Serving others Putting their needs Before our own Treating others As you will want To be treated Loving your neighbors As yourself Losing your life To gain it Carrying your cross The way of suffering To get to glory This is the paradox That Jesus offers Because in the world We don't readily Associate greatness With those who serve It's the opposite Isn't it?

Those who are served Are the ones Who the world Deems as great But Jesus wants us To see that the opposite Is true He wants us to see That the path To greatness Is through service This Is the theology Of the cross The path That Jesus laid For us And exemplified Perfectly for us And calls us To follow in In fact What Jesus is saying To the twelve apostles And to us Is this Look at the path That I walked That I am walking To glory Observe How I am among you As faithful Among you And as faithful Disciples You are meant to follow That same observation Of my example Follow the path I have laid Out for you That's what Jesus Is saying to us Because as he says this We see that his very life

Exemplified What he says Following the example Of our Lord The son of man Who came not to be served But to serve And give his life A ransom for many Jesus Is greatness Personified But in his kindness He gave us another picture Closer to home As an object lesson Let's look at that In verses 36 and 37 And he took a child And put him In the midst of them And taking him In his arms He said to them Whoever receives One such child In my name Receives me Whoever receives me Receives not me But him Who sent me Now We need to pause For a second And just Re-imagine That our context Is different From Jesus Excuse me Jesus' context In this In this passage As it pertains

To children We have different Views of children Today Than they did In the ancient world Because as you read that He said He took a child And put him In the midst of them And taken him In his arms He said to them Whoever receives this One such child In my name Receives me You might be thinking Oh that's so adorable Children are adorable They're cute I thought As I was preparing this That I might ask Baby Nico To come And hold him And have him In front of you But I thought I don't want to Scare the poor child But we've seen Baby Nico We've seen Malaya And Mariah We've seen these Young babies In our midst How cute and adorable They They are But in the ancient world They don't think of Children that way Perhaps it's because Of the rate of high mortality Of children And so Children Are nobodies In the ancient world In fact Mostly They don't name their children Until maybe They're two years old

Because They're likely to die They're nobody And that's the That's the point That Jesus is trying To drive home He took a child A little child A nobody Put him in the midst Of them Taking this Particular child In his arms This baby boy He said to them Whoever receives One such Child Whoever receives This nobody That probably doesn't Even have a name yet Whoever receives Him In my name Receives me And whoever receives Me Receives not me But him Who sent me So you see That You see the Example that Jesus Is laying before us Jesus is saying to us That a child Who can do nothing And And give nothing Who has no status A child Is Christ's Representative Of greatness [18:04] Whoever receives One such child In my name Receives me Whoever receives Me Receives not me But him Who sent me The world Economy Is this It says This Your worth Is dependent On what you Can offer What you can Contribute What Jesus Says to us That worth And

greatness Are In serving Those who can Do nothing To pay you Back Worth And greatness Are in Serving Those who can Give nothing In return And I'm sure Mothers of young Children Know this Too well Children Surely when They're Toddler And infant And toddlers What do they do?

They take And take And take And take And take And take And take That's all They do They contribute Very little Apart from Their cuteness Of course And often times I've thought As a father Oh the wisdom Of our God That he made Them So adorable Because without That So here's Jesus What he's Saying to Us He takes A little Child He presents It to Us And he Says This little Nobody Is my Representative For you To you Of what Greatness Looks like How does That look In our World Within the Church And then In the World Outside First we

Know That even Though we Think Children Are adorable We know How disposable Our culture Things Of little Children Of babies In the Womb Because they Have nothing To offer They are Nobodies Here Even in This passage Jesus is Saying Whoever Receives Them Whoever Takes Them Whoever Welcomes Them Whoever Serves Them Receives Me But let's Go beyond That Let's look Maybe in Our Epistle Reading This morning And see The contrast Of when we Don't follow This way Of Jesus This cruciform Serving Others Dying To ourselves When we Don't follow What does It look Like It looks Like what James says

In chapter Four Of his Epistle He says What causes Quarrels And what Causes Fight Among You Is it Not This That Your Passions Are At war Within You What are Those Passions It's the Exaltation Of the Self Isn't It My Way My Rule!

I Don't Don't Care What You Have To Say And what Happens When we All Act That Way Is that A recipe For Peace And Harmony No This is A recipe For Quarrels When we Cannot Serve one Another When we Cannot Submit Ultimately To God's Way And God's Rule When we Desire And do Not Have So We Murder What does Murder Look like It's Hatred In our Hearts First That's What Jesus Says Right So It's Not only When you Take an Axe Or a gun Or anything Like that It's When you Actually Have Hatred In your Heart So Is Another When we Covet And cannot Obtain So We Fight And Quarrel This Is The World This Is Worldliness That's Being Described Here And How Does James Say Such Behavior Is He Says You Adulterous People Do you Not Know That Friendship With The World Is Amity With God What

[22 : 27] We Have As James So Vividly Describes In chapter 4 Of James Is The World That We See Around Us It's A World Of Hatred Of Of Quarrels Of Of Of Of Fighting Constantly Because We've Made Ourselves Gods In Our Own Eyes But God Our Lord Offers Us A Different Way And We See That In In This Example That He Gives Us Of Himself And Our Way To Receive Him By Receiving Even Those Who Are Of Little Status!

What Does The Church Look Like In Opposition To That Kind Of Worldliness Can I Can I Maybe Suggest That What It Might Look Like For Us As Followers Of Jesus As Acolytes That's What The word Acolyte Means It's The Disciple Follower And As Jesus Sat As A Rabbi To Teach He Teaches Us To To Are Willing To To Follow What He Has Given Us Here In Mark And Serve One Another What Would That Look Like What Does That Look Like In Our Church When We Serve One Another When We Don't Seek After Status Or Position But We Seek After The Well Being Of One Another and we seek after the glory of Christ above all else and the expansion and proclamation of his gospel to those who are dying and needs it to be saved how would that radically change our gathering of course we must confess that we cannot do this this that Jesus has given us and the path he has laid before us we cannot do it in our own strength and in our own power we need God the Holy Spirit to help us and it's to him that we must constantly go this is why Jesus has given us his word and he's given us his spirit and he's given us one another so that we may serve one another and in serving another we image our creator this is the path to greatness this is the path of excellence if anyone would be first he must be last of all and servant of all let us pray

Lord we thank you for your example that you've given us and you've set before us we confess Lord that our worldly instinct our selfish worldly instinct is to seek after our own glory first and foremost we ask Lord that you will help us to continue to die to ourselves so that we may live in a new life you've given us and you've won for us help us Lord to be people who will seek after you and in seeking after you to follow the example of abating ourselves being servant of all and in doing so achieve greatness in your economy and in your kingdom we pray this in Jesus name Amen you