

Who is the Greatest?

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. I am the greatest! Now, don't worry, I'm not actually saying that.

I'm sorry I gave many people a fright, I can see. I'm really sorry about that. But I'm actually not saying that I personally am the greatest. I'm quoting someone, and you may remember who I'm quoting.

And it was the great world champion boxer, Muhammad Ali. And a few decades ago, he used to go around saying, I am the greatest.

Frankly, I'd be pretty suspicious of anyone who goes around saying, I am the greatest. But it does lead us to think, doesn't it, about what does it mean to be great?

I mean, what is greatness? What is the nature of greatness? And where do we find greatness? Well, of course, the answer to this question will vary according to who you ask.

[1 : 07] And the issue of greatness is one that Jesus deals with head on in today's Bible passage from Mark's Gospel. And seeing that it's Jesus that's got something to say about the issue, it's his voice above all others that we should take note of.

So as we do that now, let's ask God to help us. Let's ask God to speak clearly to us and ask him to help us obey him in what he wants us to do. Let's pray. Lord God, as we settle now to study the passage for examination today, please help us to hear what you have to say to us, individually and as a church.

In particular, help us to understand what it means to be great and help us to be great in the way that you would have us be. We pray it so that all people would honour you, Lord God.

In the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen. Well, it would be beneficial if you had Mark's Gospel, chapter 9, open in front of you as we follow it through.

It's on page 821, page 821 of the Black Bibles in the seats. And it's Mark, chapter 9, verse 30, page 821.

[2 : 25] Well, let's kick off at verse 30. Jesus and his disciples have been travelling and it says, they went on from there and passed through Galilee.

He did not want anyone to know it. So at this point, Jesus is passing through the area known as Galilee, near the Sea of Galilee, north of Jerusalem, far north of Jerusalem, and he's heading south towards that city where he would be killed and where he would rise again.

So he's on the home straight as far as his earthly ministry is concerned before his death. It's interesting that we read here that Jesus is passing through the area of Galilee with his disciples and you'll notice in verse 30 that it says, he didn't want anyone to know it for he was teaching his disciples.

I find this really interesting because you can imagine that in trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, Jesus would have missed so many opportunities to help people, to care for people, to look after people.

But something that's come to impress me about Jesus in recent times is that he was so good at drawing boundaries for himself. That is, he knew exactly what God wanted him to do and that is what he did.

[3 : 53] So much so that in his big prayer recorded in John's Gospel, chapter 17, verse 4, he says, I glorified you, that is God, on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.

Jesus could say to God at the end of his earthly life, I've finished the work that you gave me to do. Someone once pointed out to me that Jesus left a whole lot of people without their needs being met.

Sick people who were not healed, other people who still did not have faith. Yet at the end, he was able to say, God, I have finished the work that you gave me to do.

Jesus had a quiet purposefulness about what he did each day, the things he chose to do. And friends, if it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us.

We need to ask God, God, what is it that you would have me do with my life, with this year, with this week, with today? We can't do everything, friends.

[5 : 03] And God doesn't expect us to do everything. A great short-term and long-term prayer is, God, what is it that you would have me do as a member of your body, as a Christian?

Jesus knew that now, it wasn't time for big public ministry, big public healings or teaching sessions. It was time to draw aside with the 12 disciples, a time of intense teaching just for them.

That was what was going to happen now. And in verse 31, we read the teaching that he begins to say to them. He was teaching his disciples, saying to them, the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him.

And three days after being killed, he will rise again. This was the second time that the whole group of disciples had heard Jesus predict his death and resurrection.

And the title, Son of Man, is a special title that Jesus used of himself. Jesus is saying to his friends, I'm going to be betrayed to people, they're going to kill me, but three days later, I will rise again.

[6 : 28] I wonder if we can begin to imagine what the disciples would have been thinking. We don't know. Their thoughts aren't recorded for us. But I reckon they would have been thinking, well, hang on, Jesus is going to die?

But he's the Messiah. He's the anointed one from God. Did he say he's going to be betrayed and killed? Surely not. Surely that won't happen to God's Messiah.

And I'm just too scared to ask him what he means. And anyway, I'm not sure I want to think about it. It's too much information. And what's this stuff about rising again?

I don't get it. And as it says in verse 32, they did not understand what he was saying and they were afraid to ask him. The disciples were yet to understand that God's way is the way of being a servant.

Being a servant, in fact, to the point of death, of dying for others, as Mark writes in chapter 10, verse 45, a fairly famous Bible verse. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

[7 : 47] Or more specifically, Jesus dies on the cross for you and for me. And his death was not just orchestrated by sinful human beings who wanted to put him away because he was a nuisance.

No, Jesus' death was literally the crux of God's plan to give you and me a way back to himself. And in dying, Jesus takes the punishment for the sins of people everywhere, right through time, for those who place their trust in him.

Their sins are forgiven and wiped, clean away, and they're made acceptable to God, put right with God when we trust in Jesus and his death on the cross for us.

Christians understand and believe that those who trust in him will rise from death as Jesus did and will live forever with him. Have you accepted that Jesus died for you?

This was one of the main things that led to me becoming a Christian in 1985. The penny dropped and I realised Jesus died for me, for Warwick Grant.

[8 : 55] I was blown away. This is fantastic. He died for me. He died for me so that I could be friends with God again. And he died for you too. And he offers his arms to you to welcome you, to forgive you, and to welcome you into his kingdom of love.

Friends, accept his embrace if you haven't already. Accept his forgiveness and follow him. And what does it mean to follow Jesus?

Well, it means heaps of things. And Jesus, in verse 33, deals with one of those things, the question we mentioned before, the question of what it means to be great.

Let's look at verse 33 and 34. Then they came to Capernaum and when he was in the house, he asked them, what were you arguing about on the way?

But they were silent. For on the way, they'd argued with one another who was the greatest. Well, Jesus and his disciples have arrived in the town of Capernaum, which is on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

[10 : 08] And the house that is spoken of in verse 33 could have belonged to Peter and Andrew, two of his disciples who were brothers, who were fishermen. And we don't know that, but it's fairly likely they had a house there just near the synagogue.

And Jesus asked them, what were you arguing about on the way? We can imagine the disciples were walking with Jesus in a long line.

One commentator has said that no ancient people would dare to walk abreast of his teacher, nor indeed would the narrow footpaths of the time allow it. So Jesus headed this group of 13 men, including himself, walking down this path.

And he would have heard the occasional angry word as you listen to the conversation behind him. And they get to the house and Jesus asks, what were you arguing about on the way?

As if Jesus needed to ask that question. Jesus knew already. He knows everything. And we're told, but they were silent.

[11 : 20] There's something quite perverse, isn't there, in the thought of Jesus heading steadfastly for Jerusalem, knowing exactly what would happen to him there.

He would die. He'd be killed an awful death on a cross. And all his disciples can do is have an argument about which one of them is the greatest. Maybe they thought that the kingdom Jesus would inaugurate was an earthly one and they would be his chief ministers of state or something.

But they were silent. And I reckon they were silent because they knew they'd got it wrong. They knew that they were way off the mark.

The silence of shame, one person has called it. And under the gaze of Jesus, their petty, silly argument was seen to be what it was. They had nothing to say in their defence.

You may be aware that in the last few years a wristband has become quite popular amongst Christian young people.

[12 : 28] There might even be a young person here today wearing one. And these wristbands you can buy in Christian bookshops and they're stamped with the letters WWJD standing for What Would Jesus Do?

WWJD. You can see how they work. A young person wears this all the time and wherever they are they're constantly reminded to be the sort of person that Jesus would have them be.

What would Jesus have them do in whatever situation that confronts them? I wonder if we should also have WWJS wristbands standing for What Would Jesus Say?

Because if those wristbands existed in Jesus' day his disciples would not have been wearing them at this time. their petty arguing under the gaze of Jesus was seen to be self-serving and completely egotistical not God's way at all.

I think it's great that when Jesus' light is brought to bear on a situation we see it for as it really is for what it really is how it really is. as the song says turn your eyes upon Jesus look full in his wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

[13 : 54] William Barclay expresses it well if we took everything and set it in the sight of Jesus it would make all the difference in the world. If of everything we did we asked could I keep on doing this if Jesus was watching me or of everything we said we asked could I go on talking like this if Jesus was listening to me there would be many things that we would not do or say and the fact of Christian belief is that there is no if about it all deeds are done all words are spoken in the presence of Jesus dear God please keep us from the words and deeds that we would be ashamed that Jesus should hear and see well how does Jesus respond to the disciples stony shameful silence his response is in verse 35 he sat down called the 12 and said to them whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all

Jesus sat down we're told you might think well so what that's pretty insignificant as far as details go but it is in fact highly significant for that was the position from which a rabbi taught his disciples in sitting down Jesus was going to give a serious pronouncement of his teaching perhaps an analogy might be when I'm typing on my computer if I want to highlight something I might underline it or put it in bold or italics it jumps out at me and in sitting down Jesus is making a point I think that this is serious teaching you take heed of this and he says to his 12 disciples whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all so here it is the answer to our question at the start where is greatness to be found greatness is to be found according to

Jesus in being a servant what more is there to say that is how we are truly great according to God whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all I wonder if we really understand this do we really get it it seems that James and John two of Jesus' disciples didn't get it because in the next chapter of Mark's gospel they were asking Jesus to let them sit on either side of him in Jesus' glory in heaven they wanted the positions of great prestige and power and you can read that incident in Mark 10 verse 35 and following in Mark 10 verse 41 we're told that the other ten disciples were angry with James and John because they asked Jesus that question I suspect they were angry because they hadn't thought of it themselves but as

Jesus said as we mentioned earlier the son of man came not to serve not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many so Jesus doesn't simply command servanthood from us he models it all the way to death on a cross for you and for me he served us then on the cross and he continues to serve us now from his throne in heaven this is such a turn up from the ways of the world where those in power don't often behave like servants but more like megalomaniacs and I'm not just referring to the despots of the world it's something that we're all vulnerable to even Christians no Jesus calls us to serve to be servants even suffering servants as he himself was but it doesn't come easy does it and no doubt there are millions of examples of unservant like behaviour one example that came to my mind as I was preparing this sermon is from an area of interest to me and it concerns the astronauts of the

Apollo 11 mission this is the NASA mission that was the first one to land two men successfully on the moon in July 1969 and you'll know that the mission's commander was the first man to walk on the moon Neil Armstrong and you may know that his partner was a guy called Edwin Aldrin who had the nickname Buzz Buzz Aldrin the original mission plan was that Buzz Aldrin would step down the ladder first and be the first man to walk on the moon that was the original plan and the story goes that Neil Armstrong pulled rank and said no I am the commander of this mission and I will be going first and apparently his motives were simply because of the fame that it would create being the first human being to walk on the moon and the rest as they say is history incidentally Buzz Aldrin is a Christian from what I understand and I've read that Neil Armstrong is not a believer at all the behaviour seems to suggest that doesn't it thinking only of himself self-serving and grasping at fame not the way of

[19 : 32] Jesus so what does servant like lifestyle look like how does the rubber hit the road in our lives in the nitty gritty of life just really quickly I'm going to look at some different aspects of life and how we can be servants in those different aspects what about leadership many of us are in leadership and Jesus models servant leadership of course leaders must lead there's nothing worse than a leader who won't lead and leaders have responsibilities and sometimes have to make difficult or unpopular decisions but they are called to be servants as they exercise their leadership let's think about marriage and I know that not everyone here is married but those of you who are not can encourage and pray for those who you know are married I've been meeting with a couple who I'm marrying next month and as we have discussed the wedding service I've had cause to reflect on the vows that a man and a woman take before each other and before

God and before their friends words there are used like honour and love and protect and cherish will you honour your spouse to be will you love them protect them cherish them they all have a servanthood aspect to them and anyone today who's married would have used those words in their wedding or words like them we promise to honour love protect cherish our wife or husband to be and then we say this is my solemn vow and promise those of us here who are husbands or wives and it doesn't matter if we've been married a month or a year or 50 years do we really keep those promises do we really serve our spouse do we really honour them do we really love them do we really protect them do we really cherish them or do we take them for granted do we just focus on their faults and regard them as an irritation most of the time the bible has stacks to say about the relationship between husbands and wives and we don't have time to look at that in detail suffice here to say that the bible's message is serve each other serve as

Jesus did do what Jesus has modelled for us in our marriages parenthood teaches you very quickly about the need to be a servant if you're not a servant before you become a parent you quickly have to become one and it can be really hard as you seek to serve your children constantly it is a long term servant gig let me tell you and I'm just in the early stages and children too need to learn that they are servants also of their parents of their family of others they are not just on the receiving end they need to learn to be like Jesus as well what about the workplace or at school how can we think about being a servant there it might be voluntary work it could be paid work it could be a primary school secondary school or university do we just do the bare minimum in our workplace or school if that and what about those of us who are bosses or teachers and I work in a school and I think about my own ministry as a teacher and chaplain in a school do we throw our weight around for the sake of it or do we seek to serve our fellow staff members do we seek to serve our employees if we're bosses do we seek to serve the children in our care if we work with kids such as I do and what about our

Christian life do we live out the notion of being a servant to our fellow Christians as well as to all people do we seek to trust God as we step out and use our gifts in service for others and for God for his glory or are we so scared to fail we just don't even try when we have our cup of tea or coffee surely will we speak to those we know because that's safe or will we make a beeline for someone we perhaps haven't met someone who perhaps is alone someone we just don't know yet but will be good to get to know as we ask God to help us the implications of being a servant in all the aspects of our lives will become clearer he will help us and enable us to be the servants he wants us to be he doesn't just ask us to do this in our own strength he gives us his spirit to help us be the servants he would have us be and so to our final two verses verses 36 and 37 then Jesus took a little child and put it among them and taking it in his arms he said to them whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me

Jesus takes a child like an object lesson and holds him or her in his arm the word means he held the child in the crook of his arm and continues to teach Mark doesn't make it completely clear what the link is between verse 35 and verse 37 perhaps it's a similar message to the account of the sheep and the goats in Matthew's gospel chapter 25 in that passage Jesus makes the point that service to others is in fact service to himself welcoming a child in Jesus name is the same as welcoming Jesus and welcoming the God who sent Jesus so we're to welcome the lowly the child not simply the exalted or the well-to-do those who have power or influence in being servants we are to serve all including the lowliest I'll conclude with this story you may have heard of an

[26 : 05] Australian Christian singer whose name is Steve Grace I haven't heard a lot about him in recent years but he was fairly popular about five years ago his style of music is sort of country and ballads style of music and he writes about a tour he was doing in regional Victoria in rural Victoria specifically he'd just done this concert in Warrnambool and as he and his band and his crew moved around they were put up in various homes of Christian people wherever they travelled they contacted the churches in advance and the ministers organised accommodation and hospitality for them they just had a fantastic concert in Warrnambool and some really nice accommodation had been lined up with a lovely caring family they had a beautiful meal that night lovely clean sheets to go to sleep on I think the house had a tennis court and a swimming pool which they used they thought they were kings fantastic time and then time to leave Warrnambool and to go north inland and the next concert was in a small town that was doing it tough

I don't know which town it was it was a small town and they were doing it tough I'll read to you what he says the local pastor in this town was still very grateful to see us he had worked hard to get some willing help for this event but finding accommodation had been disheartening when the pastor had asked for help only one person had made their home available a young single mum on welfare who'd only recently become a Christian she'd arranged to move out of her home so that we could all stay there that night and after the concert he says this is what happened on entering the run down and tired place of our lodging we were confronted with the ugly stench of cat litter and on finding the light switch our house in shambles old magazines and plastic Kmart toys covered the floor the TV was dead and there was hardly any food in the fridge a cloud of murmuring and complaint filled the atmosphere remember his band are Christians and his sound crew are Christian people lukewarm showers in mildew covered bathroom did little to alleviate the mood no one was speaking my thin mattress on the floor in a cold room that I shared with my sound man

Jeff Bentley was well worn I sprinkled some eucalyptus oil on my pillow to create a presence of hygiene I couldn't wait till the morning so we could just get out of there and get on the road and then at 530 I woke with a deep sense of conviction I looked across and Jeff was laying there with his eyes wide open I knew he was thinking the same thing we were wrong all of us God did not bring us to this house to fill it with ungratefulness and pride he arranged this visit to check our hearts and hidden motives we were becoming selfish and conditional losing touch with the needs of the very people God had called us to relate to through our concerts without hesitation we woke the team our challenge to get up hit home through bleary eyes they too recognised their failings and negative attitudes we prayed together then after a coffee to kick start our brains we planned some action we would turn this grungy house into a home everyone took on different duties and rooms and when the supermarket opened we got some food supplies chocolates and flowers

I was proud to see my mates being so domesticated the toilet laundry and kitchen sparkled I autographed some of our CDs and placed them with a card on the dining table by nine o'clock we departed each smelling of ammonia and detergent each knowing we had won a personal victory each knowing always to be grateful in every circumstance if only we could be servants like that wouldn't that be good that morning Steve and his band didn't just serve the single mother whose home they stayed in they served the Lord Jesus himself Lord God transform our hearts as you did the hearts of Steve Grace and his band and crew so that we too would serve others as

Jesus did then in your eyes we truly will be great we pray in Jesus name Amen Amen
Amen Unless im Amen■■■■ Amen Amen In Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen
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