

Who Is The Greatest?

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[0 : 00] Well, the issue that Jesus is dealing with in this passage has to do with the disciples' attitude of superiority. An attitude of superiority.

As you follow through the gospel narratives, you find that the disciples were constantly arguing and disputing with one another about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God.

They all wanted a place of honor. Each one of them seemed to have thought that they were superior to the others. And you can imagine how those conversations unfolded.

And what we see presented in the scripture is that these weren't casual conversations. These often developed into full-out arguments, hateful disagreements among these men who had been called together to serve Christ, not themselves.

James Edwards, I think, interestingly puts this, describes it when he says that the disciples have imbibed the wine of rank, placement, and self-importance.

[1 : 09] And they imported into their fellowship with Jesus. The same desire for rank and importance and superiority that is indicative of the culture around us, these men had now brought into their fellowship and discipleship of Jesus.

And it's exactly the same thing that we do. It's exactly the same. As we'll see in verses 38 to 41. I really wanted to get there today and we just can't.

We're going to have to wait until next week. But this sinful attitude caused them even to look down on others who weren't a part of their special group.

They didn't judge others by whether or not they were really following Christ. They judged others on the basis of whether or not they were a part of their group, whether they identified with them.

They were more concerned if these other people were with them than they were concerned if those other people were actually truly with Christ. And they began to draw their lines of disagreement.

[2 : 15] They began to assign enemies and allies in all the wrong places. There's a real sense in which these men thought of themselves as elite.

And their time with Jesus should have produced a spirit of humility. But they were instead full of prideful arrogance. Sinclair Ferguson writing on this passage said, If we did not know our own hearts, we would find it difficult to believe that this really happened.

But any disciple who knows himself hears the echoes in his own life of such unfaithfulness. It's easy to come to these narratives about the disciples and think, man, these guys were really messed up.

But any disciple who really knows himself, says Sinclair, hears the echo of his own voice in this. We're no different than these men.

Because pride is a destructive sin that pervades the heart of every person. We all desire a place of prominence and honor above everyone else.

[3 : 37] We all want to be recognized as more significant than others. We all desire to be served more than we look to actually serve others.

And like the 12, our pride often leads to schisms. Schisms within the fellowship of believers.

Schisms within the various relationships of our lives. And it leads us to draw lines of division on the basis of things other than the gospel.

It's destructive. It's destructive. It's destructive. It's blinding. Because so few of us actually see the reality of it in our own lives.

But it's tearing us apart. It's tearing churches apart. It's tearing families apart. Says MacArthur, The danger revealed here is that pride ruins unity by destroying relationships.

[4 : 48] Relationships are based on loving sacrifice and service. On selfless deferring to and giving to others. But pride being self-focused is indifferent to others.

And beyond that, it is ultimately judgmental and critical. And therefore, it is divisive. Because of that, pride is the most common destroyer, both of relationships and churches.

And so Jesus dealt with this time and time and time again with these disciples. And they never seemed to learn the lesson. And maybe we'll learn it today.

Two things I want to point out to you. There's really four parts to this section. It goes all the way to verse 50. And we just, you know, won't have time to go that far. And so we're really going to deal with the first two sections today.

Lord willing, we'll deal with the last two sections next week. The first thing we see here in verses 31 to 32 is Jesus reaffirming his purpose. Jesus reaffirming his purpose.

[6 : 00] Look with me at verse 31. For he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 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. So though Jesus was teaching the disciples many things, the primary topic was his messianic purpose.

Now that they had trusted in who he was as the Messiah, it was necessary that he teach them what the Messiah was actually intended to do, what his purpose was.

We cannot understand our discipleship apart from understanding Jesus's Messiahship. These messianic misunderstandings were rampant among the Jews.

The disciples were no exception to that. In fact, they floundered so much during this time of training, precisely because they didn't grasp the significance of Jesus's coming.

[7 : 02] They believed in who he was, but they were confused about what he actually came to do. And the result of this misunderstanding is that they continued to fail in imitating Jesus as faithful disciples.

So now we get to this verse, and it's now the second time that Mark records Jesus teaching about his coming death and resurrection. And just as in chapter 8 and verse 31, the Lord used this messianic title, Son of Man, Son of Man.

It's from Daniel 7. All of the Jews would have recognized this title as significant to the messianic kingdom. And what they anticipated based on Daniel's prophecy in chapter 7 is that when the Son of Man came, that would be the moment that the Father would then give over the eternal kingdom to him, that he would establish the kingdom in perfection in that moment.

But what Jesus was doing in emphasizing his title as the Son of Man was linking the Daniel 7 Son of Man to the Isaiah 53 suffering servant. Jesus was teaching them in this process that no, the Son of Man must first suffer.

And it is only after he suffers that he will then rule. And Jesus explicitly described the nature of this execution.

[8 : 29] He promised resurrection after three days. All the things Jesus told them plainly. And this is now the second time that Mark has actually recorded him doing so.

And there's so much we could say about this, but I want to draw your attention here before we move on to the word delivered. Notice with me again in verse 31. For he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.

Now, who is it exactly that Jesus means will deliver him into the hands of men? We could point to a number of people involved with Jesus' crucifixion.

Perhaps we could say Judas. Well, Judas is the one that actually betrays the Lord. He maybe is the one that's responsible for handing Jesus over, is what this means. Handing Jesus over to evil men that would then proceed to execute.

We could say it's Pilate. Pilate's the one that passed the final judgment, that gave the thumbs up for the execution to continue. He's the one that handed him over to the Roman soldiers for the scourging, and then beyond that to the actual crucifixion itself.

[9 : 40] We could say maybe it's Pilate. We could say maybe it's the Sanhedrin. It's the court of Jews that had that kangaroo court in the middle of the night, that had unjustly accused Jesus, brought false witnesses against Jesus, and then passed him on to Pilate from there.

We could point to any number of these people, but I don't think that that's what Jesus actually had in mind here. This phrase, smoothed out in English, is presented as if it's in the future tense, and it's done that way in order to match the phrases, he will be killed, and after they kill him, he will rise.

Those are future tense verbs. But what's written here actually as delivered is not a future tense verb. It's a present tense verb. We could literally read this.

The Son of Man is delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will rise. But the delivering part is already done.

It's already done, present tense. This type of phrase is referred to as a divine passive, and what that means simply is that though the name of God is absent in the text, the implication of the text is that God himself is the one performing the action.

[11:00] Okay? And so Jesus says the Son of Man is delivered. That's passive. Being delivered is what's happening to Jesus, but who's the one actually doing it?

The implication on Jesus' part here is that it's God the Father who is doing this. It's God the Father. He's not being handed over into the hands of men by men.

He's being handed over into the hands of men by the Father. In other words, the atonement of Jesus made on the cross for our sins was the very plan of God for bringing salvation to man.

This was his plan established in eternity past. This was spoken of by Jesus as a guarantee. It's not possible that he will be delivered into the hands of men.

No, he has already been delivered. God has delivered him into the hands of men, and this is what they will do to him. This is not the action of a man alone. This is ultimately the result of God's plan of salvation.

[12:08] And Peter didn't grasp this at the moment, but he did eventually in Acts chapter 2 when he's preaching that great sermon after Jesus' ascension. What is it that Peter says? Acts chapter 2 verse 22.

Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. Here's what he says. This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

You crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men, and then God raised him up. What did Peter come to realize after the resurrection?

Yeah, Judas was the one who betrayed him. Yeah, Pilate was the one who gave the thumbs up on the crucifixion. Yeah, it was the soldiers who actually carried it out. Yeah, it was the Jewish Sanhedrin who were involved in their part of the process, but this was all the plan of God.

[13:13] It was God the Father who delivered Jesus into this. This was his plan. This was his plan. And what was that plan meant to accomplish? Your salvation. Your salvation.

The forgiveness of your sins. But it's not as if the Father did it to the Son unwillingly. Listen to Jesus' words in John chapter 10.

I lay down my life. I lay down my life. That I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. And this charge I have received from my Father. What do we find there? The Father didn't send the Son to earth to die for our sins, kicking and screaming.

In perfect unity, the Trinity agreed. This was the plan of salvation. Jesus, willingly submitting himself to the Father, comes to this earth, humbles himself, and lays his life down.

[14:19] No one took it from him. He laid it down. Why? So that you could be saved. So that you could know God. So that you could be in heaven, reconciled to God in eternity.

He takes our wrath. He takes our sin. He takes our death. In order that we might have his life, and his righteousness, and his eternal relationship with the Father.

And this doesn't absolve the responsibility of men in the actual act of crucifying Jesus. Jesus himself said, the night of his arrest, the Son of Man goes as it has been determined for him, but woe to him, woe to him who betrays him.

It may seem that Jesus' crucifixion was due to the wickedness of men, and it was. It was always God's plan to forgive our sins in this way.

It's the only way. It's his way. And the wonder of it all is that Jesus then says to us, come. Come.

[15:34] And anyone who comes to him, he says, in faith and repentance, I will not turn them away. I will not turn them away. Now, why did Mark put this here in chapter 9?

It's not just a transition in the narrative. It's not just another place because they were traveling that Mark decided that he was going to put this teaching here and then kind of move on.

No. I think that Mark intended for us to view this in light of Jesus' teaching on humility. Jesus, seen in his willingness to become a man and suffer on our behalf, is the premier example of humility.

And it's because of the example of our Lord that we are to imitate this humility as his disciples. We quote Philippians 2 a lot.

Maybe you'd write it down in the margins here of your notes. What is it that Paul said of Jesus' incarnation? He first says, have this mind of humility in you.

[16:48] Believer, be humble in this way as this humility is seen in your Lord in Jesus. Have this mind among you which is yours in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form.

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. It's the ultimate description of the humiliation of Jesus.

That Jesus in eternity past is one with the Father. And any change at all in him would require condescension.

And yet he became a man without actually setting aside his deity. He maintained his essence as God. That's who he is. And that is unchanging about him. But as God, he sets aside the glory of his deity in order to live as a poor man, sometimes homeless man.

And he walked among men, the betrayers, he allowed to walk with him for three years. He suffered as we suffered.

[18:12] He was tempted as we are tempted, yet without sin. And he went all the way to death, but not just any death, a criminal's death, a death he did not deserve.

And what is that the example of? If not humility. Though he is the greatest of all, he became the servant of all.

Why? So that you could know him. So that you could be forgiven. Then we go back to Psalm 117.

Why do we gather today?

Why do we praise the Lord today? Because great is his steadfast love to us. Great is his redeeming love that he left the portals of heaven to suffer for our sake and on our behalf.

There's a hymn. I think I've quoted it to you before. What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul. What wondrous love is this, O my soul.

[19:19] What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul.

To bear the dreadful curse for my soul. He goes on to say, As I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down. When I was sinking down, sinking down.

When I was sinking down beneath God's righteous frown, Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul.

Christ laid aside his crown for my soul. Why did Mark put this here? Because before Jesus ever taught his disciples to be humble servants, he himself proved to be the humblest of servants.

Verse 32, But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him. Have you ever been that student in class? The teacher has gone over this particular issue time and time and time again and you still don't get it, but you're really hoping that somebody else will be the one to raise their hand and ask the question.

[20:34] And nobody raises their hand and asks the question and so the question goes unanswered. We find the disciples in a similar predicament here, don't we? It wasn't that they couldn't intellectually grasp what Jesus was saying.

His teaching was plain. It was straightforward. It was supported by scripture. That wasn't the problem. It was logical. The problem is that they would not accept the teaching as a spiritual reality. And it's hard for us to understand this, isn't it? After all they've seen, they have full faith in who Jesus is. They have no doubt in their mind that he is the Messiah. They are following him as the Messiah.

But they find it so difficult to really believe what he's saying he's supposed to do as the Messiah. And I don't know that it's necessarily a rebellion.

I don't think that it's necessarily a denial as much as it is such difficulty in grasping a concept that was totally foreign to their understanding of messianic interpretation.

[21:40] We see back in chapter 8 the healing of the blind man as representative of what these men are going through. Jesus touches him first and he can see but he can't see clearly.

Not until Jesus touches him again. The disciples are in that frame at this point. Jesus has opened their understanding. They can see. It's just not clear yet. And it won't be until after Jesus'

resurrection.

That's when it will click for them. So right now they still don't grasp it. And then of course it's interesting that they're afraid to ask. Surely Jesus was the most approachable person to ever live. Why wouldn't they ask? Well, perhaps they were trying to avoid a rebuke that was similar to what Peter experienced in chapter 8 because it would have been difficult for them to bring up the question without arguing with Jesus about what he was teaching.

So they kept quiet out of their fear of what this suffering would mean for them. They did not ask any longer. They didn't want to talk about it anymore.

[22 : 50] Sometimes it's easier to continue in our ignorance than it is to accept a truth that we find disagreeable or alarming. I think we can sympathize with the disciples in that.

The heart of the problem is this. Because they didn't get Jesus' purpose they didn't understand discipleship. if you don't get it how could you be a faithful disciple?

If you don't get the humility of Christ and even coming to this earth much less the sacrifice that he made on your behalf how could you ever imitate that in your relationship to others?

That's where they're at which is what leads us to this second section. We see Jesus redefining greatness. First, he's reaffirming his purpose. Now we see he is redefining greatness.

Look at verse 33. They came to Capernaum and when he was in the house he asked them what were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent again from the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

[23 : 58] So they make their way back to Capernaum incognito perhaps Jesus inquired about their conversation on the road there.

Mark presents a separation between Jesus and these men now doesn't he? Who knows what this would have been like? Clearly Jesus was not with them as they traveled.

Perhaps because of the content of Jesus' teaching they found it difficult to walk alongside him at this point. Jesus gets to Capernaum they make their way into the house probably Peter's house house.

And Jesus says so what were you guys talking about back there? Now it's not that he didn't know. Of course he knew. He was no less familiar with their conversation than he was with the condition of the demon possessed boy in the previous story.

Of course he knew. Jesus asked these questions often to draw something out of the people he was talking to. And in this moment he's drawing out the pride of the disciples.

[25 : 02] We see a stark contrast as being presented between the humility of Jesus and the arrogance of his followers. The Lord had just spoken about his humiliation but all they could think about was their aspirations for honor and position in the kingdom.

Again says James Edwards in all three passion predictions Jesus speaks of the necessity of his rejection suffering and death and following all three the disciples voice their ambitions for status and prestige.

Jesus speaks of surrendering his life the disciples speak of fulfilling theirs. He counts the cost of discipleship they count its assets.

The disciples have yet to learn that the rewards of discipleship come only as a consequence of following Christ on the costly way to Jerusalem.

Verse 35 He sat down called the twelve and he said to them if anyone would be first he must be last of all and servant of all.

[26 : 15] It's interesting what Jesus does here he takes a seat actually and again this is not an inconsequential note in the narrative Jesus is assuming the customary posture of an authoritative teacher this is not a passing conversation along the way no Jesus wants these men not to take this conversation casually he wants them to recognize based on how he has positioned himself in the house he wants them to recognize I am speaking to you in a serious manner I'm speaking to you in an authoritative manner gather around and listen to what I'm about to tell you and what he taught was a radical lesson of discipleship once again just like us they are immersed in this moment in a culture that believed greatness was the result of authority and position and power and status and money and so on this idea and that culture even dominated their dinners together they meticulously seated people based on how honorable they were thought to be and it was the common aspiration of the people to be in the place of honor everyone wanted to be recognized we understand that we all want that our flesh craves it we all want the celebrity status even those of us who are introverted would never want to be put in front of people still want to be regarded as everybody else as greater

Jesus confronted this with the Pharisees at one point in Matthew 23 they do all their deeds to be seen by others they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others everybody wants a title everybody wants a place of honor everybody wants to be regarded as the greatest and this is what the disciples are arguing over which one of us is actually the greatest Jesus takes this concept of greatness and he flips it upside down on them in the kingdom of God Jesus says greatness is not a matter of position and power but of humble service to others what makes you great men is not what kind of position you have because the greatest among you is actually the least of all and the servant of all to be great in the kingdom is to imitate the greatest one of the kingdom who himself said the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many isn't that what Jesus did by example so he calls his disciples to do the same thing one of the most profound examples of this is when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples in fact

I want us to look at it before we finish today okay would you turn with me to John 13 John chapter 13 should just be a few pages to the right of where you are now John chapter 13 with me at verse 3 Jesus knowing that the father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going back to God rose from supper that's an important verse Jesus wasn't denying the reality of authority and the necessity of leadership it's not what he's doing because even before he does this for his disciples he does so knowing that all things are given into his hands that he is from God that he is one with God and that he's about to be exalted back to the right hand of God the father all of those things were true!

Do you see the significance of this?

Perhaps you've heard of what this would have meant in that cultural day most places if you were to have guests into your home you would have had a servant or a slave or someone designated to wash your guest feet as they came in it was the lowliest of tasks for the lowliest of people I mean there's even places in the Talmud where Jews weren't even to require other Jews to do this this was how lowly of a task this was considered to be and the disciples come into the upper room just before Jesus' crucifixion on the night of his on the way there they're fighting about who's the greatest who's going to sit at Jesus' right hand and left hand in the kingdom who's going to have more power who's going to be served there they're carrying the same argument with them into the last supper and as they're arguing together perhaps unnoticed Jesus gets out of his place where he's reclined there at the table and he walks over and he takes his coat off and he takes the towel that belongs to the slave and he wraps the slave towel around his waist and he puts some water in a basin and the king of heaven the creator of these sinful men gets down on his hands and on his knees and one by one goes disciple by disciple and washes their filthy stinking feet in that moment this was the utmost of humility being displayed in one task and the one who created them all is the one who is demonstrating what true leadership is what true discipleship is what true humility is if you want to be great get on your knees and wash somebody's feet that's what

[32 : 49] Jesus did that's what he did doesn't matter if you have a title doesn't matter what level position you have nobody cares nobody cares about your ego so stop trying to serve your own ego and go serve somebody else that's what Jesus did his whole purpose in coming was to do that and on the night of his own arrest he silences the room not by what he says but by what he did look at verse 12 when he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place he said to them do you understand what I have done you call me teacher and lord and you're right because that's who I am if I then your lord and teacher have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another's feet for

I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you truly truly I say to you verse 16 a servant is not greater than his master nor is a messenger greater than the one who sees him I want you to think about the gravity of that statement a servant is not greater than his master and we say we are servants of the Lord Jesus and yet the way we live our lives so often says I don't deserve to have to do what Jesus did to those men I'm better than that somebody else can do that I'd rather be in the seat of honor I'd rather be recognized I'd rather be served we call ourselves disciples but how many of us faithfully imitate the Lord by humbly serving others rather than ourselves what matters says Jesus is not your position he's not absolving the necessity of leadership and authority or the reality of it he's emphasizing a disposition of the heart again Jesus is the greatest of all and yet he became the servant of all and

on his own words he says how much more ought you to do the same thing verse 36 back in Mark 9 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 and whoever receives me receives not me but him who sent me so Jesus expounds on the teaching by illustrating it and in this case he picks up a child maybe maybe one of Peter's if they're in Peter's house perhaps he puts the child on his lap and the child represents here an individual who provides no personal advantage to us that's why he's doing it he doesn't say the greatest of all serves he says the greatest of all serves all sometimes we're not afraid to serve but we're picky about who we serve we'll serve the ones who maybe provide some type of benefit for us in return you know this guy works for the Panthers I'm gonna make sure to go cut his grass maybe he'll throw some tickets my way you know what I mean we do that right we're selfish like that Jesus says no what I mean is the type of service that serves the people that offer nothing in return the people that are helpless the people that maybe at times are annoying maybe our enemy we serve them all I want you to think of the visual impact of this illustration Harper you stand up for a second just stand up notice what Jesus does he gets a seat in the middle of the house and he grabs a child that's probably much younger than Harper but she's the smallest one here well Winnie's here isn't she but I won't mess with Winnie he says he takes the child and he embraces the child he says this is what it means embrace one another the way that Jesus has embraced this child serve the one another the way that Jesus serves this child be affectionate toward one another the way that Jesus was affectionate towards this child she can offer me nothing in return no benefit she actually cost me a lot don't you Jesus says this child cost me everything and yet I love this child I serve this child who are we to think that we're too good to serve others every one of us are enemies of God every one of us yet because of his humble servant heartedness we are reconciled to him at peace with him who are we to think that we can't serve the ones who we're not at peace with now who have hurt us Jesus says no greatness is to serve greatness is to love and the real punch packed into this is when he says when you receive one like this it's as if you're receiving me and when you receive me you receive the father now think about that what if we were to walk that statement backwards the one who embraces the father embraces the son and the one who embraces the son embraces the ones that belong to the son whether they're of status or not it doesn't matter maybe we phrase it one more way this time emphasizing the negative those who do not embrace one such like this does not embrace the son and one who does not embrace the son does not embrace the father r.c.

[40 : 13] sproul said we want glory without the cross we want greatness without humiliation salvation jesus said you can't get it that way and what jesus taught in this moment says r.c.

is not an abstract principle of life it was the principle that he was living out in front of his disciples every single day you see our faithfulness as disciples is directly linked to our understanding of jesus and the gospel and the only way to get our eyes off of ourselves is to fix them instead on the lord jesus and only when we fix our eyes on him will we learn to serve others in humility