

A Servant of All

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[0 : 00] We're going to be looking at Mark 9. We just took a little break last week from it, from our sermon series on the book of Mark. And I should tell you that as we're starting this, that just as the service got going, Neil Stopforth came up and handed me a glass of water.

And having read the passage, now I know why. There's a great reward for that. And this passage, we're going to get to that, talks a lot about greatness, about great rewards, about what God has for us.

Greatness is something that we talk about in society, we think about, we aspire to. You see some very extreme cases this week because it's Super Bowl week.

And there's always talk about who's the greatest team, who's the greatest player, what is the greatest spectacle that there is. And greatness is something that is prominent for us.

About 12 years ago, there was a book written about greatness. It was a business book called Good to Great. And I know that a number of you have read that. And I read that as part of a leadership course a number of years ago.

[1 : 11] It was a best-selling book, and it was based on research from a man named James Collins' staff, who spent four years trying to determine what made companies grow from being merely good to being great organizations, and what sorts of leaders were responsible for that kind of transition.

And early on in the process, he took this premise that goodness was anathema to greatness. And he said this, he said, Good is the enemy of great, and is why so many things don't become great.

He said, we don't really have great schools because we have good schools. We don't have great companies because we have so many good ones. And when we look back over a life and see if it is a great one, we don't see many because it's so easy to settle for a good one.

Now, that book sold way more copies than most business books would sell, about four million of them. It's unusual. And I think that one of the reasons it sold so well is because it not only had to do with companies, but it had to do with life.

It had to make, what makes for a great life. People, I think, applied it to themselves. And it captured the imagination of many. Now, the disciples this morning are captured in their imagination by the idea of greatness as well.

[2 : 32] They're fascinated by it. And they aspire to it. And I think one of the reasons they do as we begin this passage is because they have seen the greatness of Jesus.

At least three of them have, as we heard about the transfiguration two weeks ago. And the disciples who weren't there were probably wondering, why weren't we there? And what is our place going to be when Jesus, in his greatness, takes over?

And is in charge of Israel. What is my place in that kingdom going to be about? And our reading today says that they fought about it. They argued about it.

And it was something that was actually an embarrassment for them because they are on the wrong track. And we know that because of verse 31.

If you turn to verse 31 on page 845 there, it tells us that Jesus says, the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill him.

[3 : 30] And when he is killed after three days, he will rise. Now, Jesus is actually saying this three times in these three chapters, 8, 9, and 10, in his teaching about what it means to a disciple.

And of course, he's teaching them, as we learned a couple weeks ago, that his glory and his greatness will shine through in his suffering and death, as well as his rising from the dead.

That in all of that, we're going to see God's glory. But as you can see in verse 32, they did not understand the saying, and they are afraid to ask him.

And they're not afraid of Jesus. They're afraid that he is going to say more about his suffering and death. That's uncomfortable. And they're, I think, probably afraid as well because they may be worried he's going to talk more about carrying their cross and what that means.

And none of that fit into their framework of greatness. They wanted to be associated with success, with health, with power, and with status.

[4 : 36] And so they go on this road towards Capernaum in a state of denial. You know, we don't want to hear any of that stuff. And it is such a state of denial that they have a long conversation about their own greatness, status, and success with Jesus.

And when they get to the house, in verse 33, Jesus asks them a searching heart question. He says, What were you discussing on the way?

Well, the silence is deafening. And even Peter, who's very good at breaking the silence, was totally quiet. And it's because, of course, they had been fighting about Jesus, arguing about who would be greatest.

And it's very likely that Peter had at least as much to say as anybody else. And I think it was probably the loudest as well. But the amazing thing is, is that Jesus does not rebuke his disciples for having this long argument on the road, for endangering their fellowship, which is really what they were doing.

Instead, what he does is he uses their argument to teach them about what true greatness is. And it's so very helpful for us today to hear it. And the way that he teaches is very memorable.

[5 : 56] If you look at verse 35, he sat down, it says, at the top of the page there, he sat down. And that's significant because when a rabbi or teacher sits down, it means that it is a time of important teaching.

This is something to really remember. And then he called the 12 to him. And when they all sat down around him in a circle, he said something revolutionary.

And it was revolutionary, not just for their culture, but for ours as well, I think. It was in a time in Palestine when there was a strong sense of status, of what it meant to be important and influential.

And Jesus says this. He says, Now that's revolutionary.

And the thing that's amazing about that statement is he is actually affirming their ambition. But he's saying that your greatness is going to be measured by how well you serve other people.

[7 : 08] That is God's definition of greatness. And it's a status that will never end. And it must have been something that was difficult to take in.

There's deep humility in this. It's very interesting, by the way, thinking back to that book that Jim Collins wrote, that there was a shocking thing to him, a thing that was counterintuitive, he said.

And that was that all of the leaders of the greatest companies, you know, he picked 1,400 of them and came down with 11 that he considered great. All of them had leaders who not only had a strong ambition to see their company succeed, but they had a deep humility as well.

And so striving after greatness and recognition and so forth was just not part of their DNA. And we know this, he says, because only one out of the 11 wrote an autobiography.

And he said the one who wrote the autobiography titled his book *The Lucky One*. And it's an example in this research of a surprising thing that came out that's good research because it discovers the thing of God, that there is something about humility that is actually essential for true greatness.

[8 : 27] And Jesus explains this further. He gives a visual lesson. And he got up, he went over to one of the little children who was in the background of that room in the house, and he brought this child to stand with him in front of all the disciples.

He picks up the child in his arms and holds him lovingly. And as he's doing that, he says to them, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.

And whoever receives me receives not me, but him who sent me, God the Father. And you know, this would have completely floored the disciples.

And they were sitting on the floor already. But it would have floored them because the status of children was very different than what we have in Canada now. They were not sentimental at all about children.

They were employees. They worked with the rest of the family as soon as they were able. And they were thought of as people who have not yet arrived.

[9 : 33] That was the understanding of a child, of how they understood children. They were very, very last in society in terms of status. But we've got to be clear here that Jesus is not in this teaching telling disciples to be like children.

He's actually teaching them to be like Jesus who embraces children and sees deep value in them even when the society around them does not.

Even though they are people that cannot give anything in return. So he's telling the disciples to welcome the insignificant and powerless ones of the world.

People who can't give status to you. They can't benefit you in any way. They are people who can't support your agenda. And he says, do this in my name.

In other words, with my authority. With my agenda. My mission. Because God the Son and God the Father identified very closely with the people that you serve.

[10 : 35] so closely that he says, when you do this you receive me, Jesus says. You receive God the Father who sent him. And that's radical for the disciples and for us. It turns our understanding of greatness right upside down.

Because again, it has nothing to do with influence or status. True greatness is a strong ambition to serve. That's what it arises out of.

And so these small acts which seem very small to the world, they seem small to us as well, don't they? The small acts of receiving, of welcoming, of serving people hold an extraordinary value and importance to God.

In fact, serving is the primary way that believers imitate and fulfill Jesus' mission. It is the way that we do it. Jesus came to die for each of us who can offer him nothing.

That's how our passage starts. And he gives himself to death for us simply for the sake of those who he served. Simply because of his love for each of us.

[11 : 45] And we are called to this radicalness. There's no exceptions. Everyone is called in every aspect of our life, not just the life in our home, in our church.

So even if you are in a position of great authority where there are people who serve you, you are called to have an attitude of a servant towards them.

So even if there are many people in business, in your business, or in a profession that you're part of, or even in your home, you serve those who you lead. And it doesn't mean anything, it doesn't mean that you abdicate authority, but it does mean having this attitude of the heart where you are completely servant-like because you are under Jesus' authority.

Now that's a hard thing for us to take in. And we know this because John, who is the closest to Jesus, found it very hard as well. In verse 38, right after this teaching, John shows that he understands his call to be a disciple as an entitlement, as a high status, instead of a call to service.

And he says, he says, you know, we tried to stop somebody from casting out demons in your name because he wasn't following us. Notice he doesn't say following you, Jesus, he says following us.

[13 : 07] He wasn't part of the inner circle. And I think part of his problem that John had was jealousy. You know, just earlier on in the chapter, the disciples could not cast out a demon.

And here is this guy who hasn't been with them who's doing it in Jesus' name. And Jesus tells John, don't stop him because if he does it in my name with faith in me, in other words, he cannot speak evil of me.

And he, if he's not against us, is for us as well. Now this is uncomfortable for John because what Jesus is talking about is what Mark has been talking about.

His grace absolutely overflows into people's lives no matter how deserving they are, no matter what their status is. And that's what's happening here. He pours his grace onto this man who's not part of the inner circle so that he is doing Jesus' ministry.

And Jesus teaches John here to receive and to serve all those who are serving Jesus, no matter how different they are from you or how deserving you feel they are. Now we experienced this.

[14 : 16] We received in this way. today we saw God work in our own lives here at St. John's in extraordinary ways as we took our stand and lost our building because there are many different churches, people who were different from us as Christians who cared for us.

And so there were people who were Roman Catholic, charismatic, fundamentalist, orthodox, very small, very large churches, churches very far away from us culturally.

They cared for us in prayer and have offered help to us in our time of need. And some of these churches were so very different from us that we might not even have approved about the way that they go about ministry.

But they served us. And that's a good lesson for us on how to receive. And it goes, that lesson is driven home in verse 41.

There's a strong incentive for us to receive the care of other Christians and to see it as very, very important.

[15 : 19] Look at verse 41. It says, Jesus says something incredibly important. And we know that because he says, for truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

Thank you, Neil, for that, by the way. And what it's saying here is that there are people outside the church who are going to receive you because you belong to Christ.

Notice that. And I think that it is not only talking about other churches or other Christian groups. It is also talking about people who do not know Christ yet, who accept who you are and actually your message of salvation as well.

Come to know Jesus. That is going to happen. You will be welcomed, it says. And when they do this for you in even the smallest way, God will reward you, will reward them, I should say.

And this tells us two things. It says that if you are a disciple, then your life is not your own. It says here you belong to Christ. You serve as he did.

[16 : 30] But secondly, it also means that you are Jesus' ambassador if you are serving him, if you belong to him. You represent him as his servant. And there is no greater honor in God's sight than being that servant, being in that role.

In fact, God values you so much as his servant that he deeply rewards anyone who shows even the smallest kindness to you. You see what he's doing?

He's raising up what it means to be a servant in Jesus' name. And he rewards those who give, who care for them. And so there's this deep loveliness that we see so far in choosing to be last and a servant of all because of Jesus.

But the second half of this reading is incredibly important for us as well because in it there is a grave warning about the danger of sin.

It is a danger, it's a danger that means that we can fall into choosing sin in our own lives, choosing to reject Jesus. And the last seven verses are all about the sin in the life of a disciple.

[17 : 41] It's a real reminder that Jesus is all about saving us from sin and to life. That's what he's doing through our serving. That's what he's doing as we are his ambassadors.

We are receiving this marvelous grace every day and that is humbling, humbling to us. We come as people who ourselves are in need of God's grace in our life. And it shows that in the church we are in the healing business.

So we serve in order that people might have life and be healed from rampant sin, the disease of death as well. So we must be vigilant that we don't do the opposite of our mandate.

We cannot ever cause those who belong to Jesus to fall away from him, to be hurt. And we can do this by our behavior, by divisive talk such as the disciples were doing in fighting about their own greatness.

We can do it by teaching what is contrary to what God requires in his word. And what Jesus does in this section is he takes our sin very seriously.

[18 : 50] And he says this, he says it would be better if that person responsible for failing Jesus was drowned with a huge weight around their neck. In other words, our sin has an effect on other people.

It does the opposite of healing. And it is important that we are aware of it and stop it. Well, the one who I found most helpful in applying this was C.S. Lewis.

And he wrote, he preached an incredible sermon called The Weight of Glory. And in this sermon, he very memorably tells us how every day we are helping one another either towards heaven or towards hell, which Jesus talks a lot about in this little section.

And he says this in this little paragraph. He said, The load or the weight or the burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back. And it's a load so heavy that only humility can carry it.

And the backs of the proud will be broken. It's a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which if you saw it now you would be strongly tempted to worship or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet if at all only in a nightmare.

[20 : 17] All day long we are in some degree helping each other to one or other of these destinations. And it's in light of these overwhelming possibilities it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them that we should conduct all our dealings with one another all friendships all loves all play all politics.

There are no ordinary people you have never talked to a mere mortal. They're sobering words they're profound they are a reminder that our choices and what we say and what we do have a profound effect on other people.

And there is an awesome greatness about helping somebody towards heaven. It's the point of our serving. But there's also a profound failure if we are moving someone closer to hell.

And that's the warning here. And that's why Jesus ends his teaching at this house by calling his disciples to examine their own hearts and minds so that they can detect sin that may creep into their own lives and cause spiritual failure in themselves and in other people.

There's a great humility in looking at yourself in this way. You know we are to bring the healing of the gospel that we ourselves receive to each other and to our neighbors and to the community.

[21 : 42] But we can only do this if we are constantly aware of our own need of God's grace. Our need for repentance and the forgiveness of our sins. And that's why it's wonderful to be able to see the church year and how it helps us in this.

Lent is coming up in only 10 days. You may not realize this. Ash Wednesday starts. And that is the season where we are called especially to that work of spiritual self-examination to look within ourselves and say where is there sin that needs to be forgiven and repented of.

Well the way that Jesus does this for us in 42 through 48 is he talks about heaven and he talks about hell three times. And he does believe in hell by the way which there's many Christians who don't.

He says it is unquenchable. It's a consequence of rejecting God that goes on forever. And so he says avoid sin and get rid of it at all costs. You cannot treat it flippantly.

And Jesus uses shocking images of getting rid of body parts. It would be rated R probably if it was a movie to teach the disciples this.

[22 : 54] And he's not teaching about self-mutilation about you know body parts itself. He is using these pictures to get across this most important point to them.

He is saying that your eyes your hands and your feet are of deep value to you. They are of unsurpassing worth but the life of God is worth more.

It is worth anything. It is worth giving up anything of the most massive value to you in order to keep that life and to have it always.

And notice that every time he refers to hell Jesus also mentions life. He mentions the kingdom of God. He puts them both together and he says choose life. Do it every time even if it costs you everything.

It's far better he says to enter life with deep losses than to enter hell with everything intact. And I think that's talking about what it means to carry your cross.

[23 : 56] To be able to give up those things that are most value to you in order to grab hold of life. And Jesus teaches his disciples as the one who has already called them.

Who has given them this life. Who has chosen them. He pours his overflowing grace onto them and onto us as well. And Jesus is saying receive that grace every day.

Welcome that grace into your life every day. Well we close this passage with an interesting picture. It's a picture of salt in verse 50.

And Jesus teaches us to be salty. Why does he say that? Well salt added to sacrifice was a symbol of purity and holiness.

It was put on along with the things that were offered for the forgiveness of sins in the Old Testament. In fact in Leviticus salt was called salt of the covenant. And not only that but salt was the essential to the life of the world of the disciples that they lived in.

[24 : 59] It was used for preservation of food. It was used for flavoring food. It was for cleaning. And Jesus is saying don't be bland as you follow Jesus.

Strive for greatness in God's eyes. The life of serving is spiritual sacrifice. It's inconvenience. It's messy. It's costly.

But this is how you are great. This is how you are distinctive in the way God wants you to be. Because as we serve we bring a great blessing to people in our life and into society.

There is a ripple effect. There is this distinctive way of serving one another that brings peace into the church. And through our servant attitude Jesus flavors the society around us.

It prevents sin from taking hold in that society. It brings cleansing. And so there's a profound goodness in being part of God's plan and mission in the world.

[26 : 00] The forgiveness of sins is of utmost benefit to the world and to our community. And so in God's estimation as we leave this passage in God's estimation there's nothing greater on earth than one who indiscriminately serves the Lord Jesus Christ and follows him.

There's nothing greater. And Jesus is calling us today to seek to strive after that greatness. To have as our ambition to be what God considers to be of great value in this world.

And you know we are freed to do this. It is something that God gives us grace and freedom to just do. Christ has borne the cost of my failures therefore I can strive for and rejoice in the success of other people.

I can strive for it as best in them because of what Jesus has done for me in taking the cost of my failure. And so when we see God in his glory when we see Jesus face to face on the day of glory there's no earthly reward.

There's no recognition of greatness. There's no glory that the world can give that could come close to hearing God say to us when we see him one day well done good and faithful servant.

[27 : 23] Well done good and faithful servant. That is our ambition. to hear those words. May God in his mercy and his grace give us strength to serve in that way.

In Jesus name. Amen.