

Greatness Mark 9:30-41

Jesus recently returned from the mountain where he met with the greatest prophets, Moses and Elijah, was transfigured in radiance, and was honored by the Father who declared “This is my beloved Son; hear him!” (9:7). He has been talking about the way of the cross, and right after he reiterates that the Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men and die, the disciples argue about who is the greatest (vv30-32). We might despise them, but at least they argue about the kingdom of God—we tend shut it out into another dimension and function as if our lives are at the center of the universe. Jesus teaches we are made for greatness, how to get it, and the lavish way the Father bestows it.

Greatness is good What’s interesting about Jesus’ response (to their silence!) is that he doesn’t reject the desire for greatness; he tells them how to achieve it. Augustine: “This text teaches that discipleship grows first by a downward, lowly movement, as a tree seeking roots, in order then to reach skyward.” We are built for greatness. Some people will believe lies about God and themselves and throw in the towel rather than serve with dedication. But the Bible is plain in telling us to run the race, fight the good fight, to seek for glory, honor and immortality (Heb. 12:1-2; 1 Tim. 6:11-12; Rom. 2:6-7). We should want greatness in marriage, parenting, kids, faith, prayer life, church and legacy.

Greatness is gained by service The Gospels don’t tell us what the argument was about probably because it was so pathetic. We know enough not to argue like this out loud, but we still think this way. We constantly compare and measure and are blinded by ungodly ambition (2 Cor. 10:12). Jesus sits them down to say the way to be first is to be the servant of all (v35). The way up is down, the way to become the greatest is to put everyone else above you. This deep paradox that is rooted in the character of God himself. Jesus is the greatest, the name above every name, *and* also the most humble person to ever live. He washed the disciples’ feet and died for his enemies. Jesus gives a live example, a little child taken up into his arms (vv36-7). The disciples have been jockeying for position, but what rung will this little kid provide on the ladder of success? And yet to receive this child in Jesus’ name is to receive him, and to receive him is to receive the Father, the one who spoke from the cloud. *To receive* means show hospitality and all the anxiety and work that comes with it. The word for child in Aramaic could be translated *servant*. The way to greatness is to see Jesus in “unimportant” and uninteresting people, and serve them (cf. Jms. 2:1-4).

Greatness is bestowed in unexpected places John offers a counter example. If the little child is to be received in Jesus’ name, not everyone will follow him and ought to be embraced, like this exorcist who wouldn’t listen (v38). Jesus corrects them. It’s not easy to do a mighty work in the name of Jesus and then speak evil of him. “For the one who is not against us is for us” (v41). The disciples are like Joshua telling Moses to stop the prophets. “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” (Num. 11:26-29). We get to rejoice in even the giving of a cup of cold water to someone in Jesus’ name. Imagine why the apostles would have responded this way, the same way we in the church respond to the work going on throughout God’s great kingdom. This is the opposite of us-versus-them thinking. It’s realizing that anyone bearing the name of Jesus and doing his work is on our team, and he rewards even the smallest deed. What comes to mind when you learn that someone is doing the same as what you are doing and being blessed by God? When we realize that we’re built for greatness, receive it by serving others the way Jesus did, then it’s easy to repent our envying and arguing about greatness. This didn’t come easy for Jesus. How are the apostles doing? Terrible, but he trusts the Father to grow the seeds. We’re sitting in the tree that grew. Rather than giving up on them, Jesus continues to serve them all, seeing the fruit of his labor in the resurrection. So can we (Acts 18:10).

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Mark 9:30-41 *30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 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." 32 But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. 33 And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 35 And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." 36 And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." 38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 For the one who is not against us is for us. 41 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.*

1. What are the disciples arguing about, and why do you think they wouldn't answer Jesus' question (verse 33-4)?
2. Jesus tells the disciples how to become great in his kingdom. What is the way (verse 35)?
3. What ways can you serve your parents and brothers and sisters more? List three or more.
4. God's kingdom is so big, filled with churches and Christians who love and serve him faithfully. Draw a picture of three churches in the background and people from them playing together.

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." --Mark 9:35