

We just celebrated Easter last week and prior to that, we worked through our series on Sabbath. Now we're returning to Mark, going verse by verse, and we've come to a conversation about who is the greatest.

Sometimes we ask questions like, "Who do you think is the greatest of all time?" And to debate the greatest usually goes on the lines of athletes or singers or actors. I would say, "The greatest athletes of all time include Michael Jordan or maybe Tom Brady," and you'd probably say, "You're crazy; that's not it!" We'd argue back and forth. I was trying to come up with who are the greatest actors of all time. I'd probably put Meryl Streep or Humphrey Bogart in that category. Greatest singers of all time? That was a hard one for me to think about. Probably Aretha Franklin or Elvis Presley could be up there.

When I was a young pastor about 25 years ago, I came into a new church, and I was looking for someone to mentor me. I asked the pastors in my network for somebody older and wiser that had walked this road, who could come alongside me in that season of my life. The church said they had the perfect guy for me. His name was Pastor Don. I asked them to tell me about him.

Pastor Don had pastored for a long time in a Denver suburb and had a very large church there. His ministry was really flourishing. But then his wife, Judy, developed multiple sclerosis and it was the quick progressing kind. Don realized that he couldn't continue to pastor this large church with this large staff and care for his wife at the same time. Having someone else care for Judy was not an option. So he resigned from his ministry and moved back to his small hometown in Wisconsin where the size of the town was smaller than the church he had in Denver.

I knew I had something to learn from this guy. This would be time well spent. So, we connected and agreed to meet twice a month. I'd make the drive to him because he couldn't make the drive. I'd drive the 40 miles to see him, and we'd discuss theology. We'd discuss books that we were reading. We'd read a book together. We prayed together. We discussed challenges and obstacles and victories in our ministries. I just listened to him and spent that time with him, and then he'd have to take a break because he'd have to go home.

Often there's a parsonage to the side in these little churches. So about 50 feet away was the parsonage, and there was this well-worn path where Don would go back and forth several times a day from his church study to his home so he could prepare lunch for Judy. I went over often and shared lunch with him. I watched Don spoon-feed his wife and then wipe her face and clean up the kitchen, and then we'd continue to talk and visit.

I learned incredible things about what it means to be a true follower of Jesus. I loved going there. I would drive very fast to get there on those country roads. One time I got a speeding ticket, and I thought, "Well, okay, that's all right. I don't get these often." And then I found out that in my county, everybody who gets a speeding ticket gets their name in the paper! So this guy comes up and says, "Hey, Pastor, I see that you like to go fast through the woods on these country roads!"

Don has since gone to be with the Lord, and in my opinion, Don is one of the greatest of all time. He epitomizes to me the theme of our passage for this message: The greatest in God's kingdom is the humble servant of all. Don served others. He cared for the most vulnerable. He let go of the accolades, position, and posture that he had in this larger church to live out his faith in relative obscurity in the north woods.

He let go of self. He was humble, and he considered it a privilege to care for his wife. In all the things that we discussed, what I remember most was him tenderly spoon-feeding his wife at the table. This small congregation was blessed to have Don as their pastor, and they knew it, which made it even more special.

So God is looking for kingdom greatness. It's described throughout the scriptures with a common thread. Isaiah 66:2

"Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the Lord. "These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit and who tremble at my word."

In Luke 14:11 Jesus says, "*For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*" In Ephesians 4:1-2 Paul says, "*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*" In James 4:10, "*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*"

You see the common thread in these verses. Greatness is characterized by humility, and here in Mark 9, we see the greatest of all time—Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate humble servant and true greatness. This greatness transcends generations, cultures, sports, and celebrities. And I hope we are all encouraged today as we take a fresh look at this probably familiar passage to many of us.

My prayer is that God's Word is illuminated to us. That's always my prayer, that it is illuminated to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. We're going to be able to embrace this kingdom's greatness more and more in our lives, and this requires us to take an honest look at ourselves. Embracing humility is the road less traveled. We may gain a new

understanding, but then we need to apply it to our lives, situations, and our circumstances.

Let's start out by looking at the ways of greatness that are modeled here by the greatest of all time. Jesus is the ultimate humble servant. *"They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples" (Mark 30-31a)*. So the last time we were in Mark, Jesus and his disciples were around this area north of Galilee called Caesarea of Philippi. And in that timeframe, Jesus invited Peter, John, and James to experience the transfiguration on the mountain, probably Mount Hermon.

Then Jesus made it clear after that as he descended from the mountain that they were headed back to Jerusalem. It was a long trip, but what the disciples didn't understand was that this was going to be Jesus' last trip into Jerusalem because his death was imminent. To get to Jerusalem, they had to travel through Galilee, which is a very familiar place.

We see in prior passages in Mark that it was in Galilee where Jesus drew the largest crowds. But preaching to crowds here was not his goal. That was now in his past. Over the next few weeks, Jesus focused on being alone with his 12 disciples so he could teach them. It was to be a crash course to prepare them for what was ahead with no distractions. They needed to be equipped, and the time was short.

So while on the road, Jesus starts prophesying about his death. It's the second recorded time in Mark that he does this. The first time was in Mark 8. If you remember, when he prophesied about his death, Peter rebuked him because he just couldn't accept it. And what did Jesus do after Peter rebuked him? He turned around and rebuked Peter, rebuked him for his human concerns, putting his human concerns above God's concerns. "He said to them, *"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."* (v. 31b).

The phrase "he said to them" in the original language tells us that Jesus spoke to them often about his death over and over again, wanting them to realize this was really going to happen. And Jesus refers to himself here as the Son of Man. It's Jesus' favorite title for himself. It's a self-description. The title comes from the Old Testament book of Daniel. It means God-man, who is Lord over all. So Mark 9 adds new information. He says delivered. Delivered in the original language is *paradidomi*, which means to be handed over. The Son of Man is to be delivered, to be handed over into the hands of men.

Mark uses this Greek word for delivered through the rest of the gospel. It's the same word he used to describe Judas' betrayal of Jesus as he betrayed him for 30 pieces of silver. Jesus was betrayed and delivered into the hands of men. It was no accidental death that was about to happen. It wasn't random. It was premeditated. Greek scholars call this a futuristic present, which gives the outcome a sense of certainty. So Judas handed him over to the Jewish leaders, and then they handed him over or delivered him into the hands of Pilate, and then Pilate delivered or handed him over to the Roman soldiers to crucify him.

Many hands by many men killed Jesus. We have to remember; this isn't a random death. This may be hard to accept for some of us, but this

was God's plan. It was a necessary plan for Jesus to die for the sins of mankind because only he was the perfect atoning sacrifice. Jesus was willing to die in our place, and this was to fulfill God's greater purpose.

This may blow our minds, but God actually initiated this plan for his Son to die before the earth even came into existence. And I think this is what blew Peter's mind back in chapter 8 and why he rebuked Jesus. Isaiah 53:6, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." God planned to save his children, and he planned to pay the ultimate price to do so. That same word for delivered is used by Luke in Acts 2:23. *"This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."*

Mark 9:31 ends with, "and after three days he will rise." Mark uses the active voice here telling us that Christ will rise under his own power, under his own might. Jesus usually keeps his death and resurrection together in his teaching so that it reminds us he will not just physically die; he will physically and bodily be resurrected. He dies, and then he lives again.

His death is not the end; it's the beginning. Through his death, his disciples and all of us here today have been offered life. So as much as I'd like to judge the disciples at this point in the story, I can't. I wonder if I was on that road with him in my selfishness and pride, what would I think would be the perfect plan as to how this should all work out? Could I untangle the meaning of it?

Look at the disciple's response to Jesus' teaching in verse 32. *"But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."* So Jesus' teaching went right over their heads. They didn't connect what God was doing through his son, and they continued to imagine Jesus as their deliverer from Rome, not a deliverer of their sins.

They didn't say anything, but you know what they were thinking. Teacher, we hear this, but we don't want to understand this. You keep telling us how painful this is going to be, and we don't want to hear it. Mark says they were afraid; they were anxious. They were frightened by what Jesus told them and what the disciples had yet to learn. It's impossible to be made clean just by being in proximity of Jesus for three years. Religion and good works may temporarily bring a good feeling, bring some relief from past guilt, from past sins, from the pain of trauma, but it seems to return. The shame resurfaces. The past trauma somehow activates again. The disciples had yet to learn that God had to deliver his Son to die and that Jesus's death was the only way they could be saved and escape the pain, escape the judgment.

In Romans 5:6, Paul says, *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."* and then 5:8, *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* So the disciples had to learn that their teacher was the greatest of all time and that Jesus Christ perfectly embodies humility. God left heaven to live as a man in a broken and sinful world for 33 years. Then he willingly

sacrificed his life for his children. And it wasn't just any death, but the death of a criminal, a violent death on the cross.

Humility is the greatest of all. It is dying to self. It's serving others. It's giving yourself away. It's seeking what is best for others. It's laying down one's life for another. That's the greatest expression of humility. It's heroic. Jesus came to earth to die in the hands of evil men, and God orchestrated it all for us. It's a hard lesson for us to learn, but so necessary for us to understand, and that's why he repeats it over and over again, as we all should.

Next, Jesus exposes the disciple's lack of humility.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest." vv. 33-34:

Capernaum was in Galilee. It had been their home base. Certainly, Peter had a house there, which is well documented. But instead of ministering in the marketplace or in the synagogues as he'd done in the past, they went to a private home, probably Peter's home. And like any good teacher, he asks a question. When Jesus asks the question, it tells us that his intention is to provide some new teaching.

Now, think about this. The Son of Man asks them a question, how do they respond? Silence. They wouldn't say anything because they were embarrassed. As one commentator put it, Jesus had spoken of his humiliation, and all they could think about was their exaltation. He was probably walking ahead of them on the road and could hear that they were arguing. The language tells us they were in a hot argument about something. Imagine how Jesus must have felt. His life was about to come to a violent end, and what were his closest followers, his friends doing? They were arguing about which one of them was the greatest. So the path to greatness is a path of denying self, and we understand that the disciples struggled with that.

We see it later in the upper room. Hours before Jesus was arrested and probably just minutes before Judas betrayed Jesus, what did Jesus do? He removed his outer garment and took a basin of water. He got down on his knees and washed their feet. This incarnate God who was about to go to the cross washed their dirty feet.

In Mark 10, Jesus drew a comparison between true greatness and the greatness that was given or deferred to the rulers of the age, the Roman rulers, and the Gentile officials who lorded it over them. And I love this comparison. In Mark 10:43-45 Jesus said,

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:43-45

The disciples wanted to be first in Christ's kingdom. They wanted the chief seats; they wanted to be ranked; they wanted status.

Can't you hear Peter, James, and John say, "You know, well, actually, the greatest is probably one of us because he invited us up to the mountain." And Peter's saying, "Well, he called me the Rock. It has to be me. I've got to be the greatest. I'm kind of the spokesman for the whole gang. Then James and John would say, "Oh no. We were invited up there and he called us the Sons of Thunder. We need to be first there."

Matthew 20 describes that John and James' mother got into the act and came up to Jesus and knelt down before him and said, "Could you please put my sons, one on your right and one on your left when you get to heaven?" And Jesus said, "Woman, you don't know what you're asking."

I could see James and John probably arguing, "Well, I want to be on the right." "Yeah, I'm going to be on the left." "I want to be on the right." That's just an observation here on the negative effects of pride. How can there be unity in the church when pride is throughout? You see the lack of unity here amongst the disciples. Pride makes us judgmental, critical, comparative, belittling, and pushing down others. Pride fills people up so they can't love the way Jesus wants them to love.

I'll just throw out a random question. Is it possible that some of us here, maybe a few of us, struggle with pride occasionally? Maybe this will hit home. I'm asking myself this as I'm going through this. How would I know for sure if I'm lacking humility? I mean, I would think probably one way is I'm a married man. Probably the best way to know if I'm lacking humility would be to ask my wife! So, married guys, I encourage you that way.

You remember back in your past, maybe when you were in school and you needed to be the first in line? Did you need to be called on first by the teacher? How about today? Do you need to be acknowledged first at work, complimented first on a new look, first in your group to board the plane, first in front of other cars on the freeway, first off the line at a green light, first with the new and latest tech gadget, first to see the new movie? They argued about privilege and rewards and status. Do you find yourself posturing for attention, posturing for promotion? Pride can be subtle. Do you find that most of the time when you tell stories, and you're involved in that story, you always come out looking good? Do you defend your own behavior over and over with your team at work justifying it? Do you get defensive as a parent or a spouse? Do you admit when you're wrong and take responsibility?

Chris Mueller, a teaching pastor I enjoy at Faith Bible Church in Marietta, wrote this: "Greatness is not found in being first, but in living last." In living last, to be comfortable, secure, finding significance in living last. Humility doesn't focus on self; it focuses on serving. And true greatness is thinking more about the greatest of all time than thinking about yourself.

Think for a moment about Paul when prior to his conversion, he called himself a Pharisee of Pharisees. Competitive, he had to win, and he was ruthless. After his encounter with Jesus, after his surrender to Christ, and after he was filled with the Holy Spirit, he was transformed. And latter in life, he described himself as, "I am the least of the apostles. I am the least of all the saints. I am the foremost of sinners." As the

years passed, Paul thought less and less about himself and increasingly thought more about Christ, like John the Baptist, who said when he saw Jesus, he must increase, and I must decrease.

How do we develop this thing called humility that's so foreign to our culture? How do I stop being consumed with self? It's hard to learn and certainly hard to measure progress. I was thinking about that. Someone comes up to you and asks, what has God been teaching you lately? And you say, well, I think he's teaching me about humility, and I think I about have that down. I'm ready to move on to something else. I want to learn about eschatology. It just doesn't work. You're back to square one.

So how do we develop humility? It's a fair question, and that's what Jesus teaches us here in these final verses.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." vv. 35-37

It's interesting. Mark includes the phrases "sitting down" and "called the 12." That's the posture a rabbi would take in Jesus's day. The teacher, when he was ready to teach, would be seated, and then he would call his students to gather around him to learn something important.

So as I dug deeper into verse 35 this week, some thoughts came to mind. I think 35 is kind of the key verse of this whole passage. So a question: Are those in authority really supposed to serve those under their authority? Absolutely, yes. It doesn't matter what your formal position is. Those who are great come alongside and they serve those people, all people. To bless and help them and to understand this verse, we must keep this first priority. Our priority is to love the Lord our God with all our being. And we allow that to shape and inform the way we serve others. We learn boundaries. We learn what's truly helping or what might be helping.

Let the Lord set the terms for how we serve. Certainly, this applies when we consider some of the neediest among us—perpetual offenders, those who seem to be running from God. Let God inform us on how we can best serve those that, we might say, there's extra grace required as we serve this person. What does that look like? It takes wisdom. It takes discernment. It takes a close walk with God in order to serve well and learn to be a servant of all.

Another thing that I think is interesting is the context of when this is given. The teaching by Jesus was given before there was a time of real orchestrated persecution in the church. They're about to get exposed to this very soon. I think about this, and I think as our culture becomes more immoral, more lawless, and more anti-Christian, our tendency in the church is to withdraw, to self-protect, to enter into our own little protective bubble. But when we make that decision that we want to be left alone, our love dies.

That's not what we're created to do. We're called to be a servant of all, and there's no exception clause. Unless our world is imploding, we are to serve. There's no persecution exception. So this teaching applies to difficult times. It applies to the most difficult people and our willingness to humbly serve others in dark times. What does that do? It brings light and exposes Christ for who he is and everyone's need for the Savior.

That last phrase "must be the very last," To me, this emphasis means that we can't go into this with hidden agendas as we serve. We can't serve to expect something from others in return, expecting to be placed in a position by others. But our position is right where we're supposed to be. We're supposed to be serving. That was a position given to us by Almighty God. Pride and vanity don't have a place to grow roots when we take these words of Jesus to heart.

And yet when we serve, we need to accept thanks from those we serve. We accept their thanks from those who watch you serve, and they realize some of the things you do. We accept their thanks as well, but we must consider it our God-appointed duty. That's the most important thing. It is our privilege to serve, welcome, honor, and be gracious to even the most vulnerable. Promote their well-being and success, remembering that every person has significance and worth. So not only does pride destroy unity, but it also diminishes self because if pride controls us, we think we become bigger when there's recognition or promotion.

But Jesus is telling us the opposite is true. When we let pride control us, we get the opposite of what we truly want. We get the opposite of what we were created for. God designed us to experience and be fulfilled in this role of serving and embracing a life of humility. God is asking us to trust him on this. And what he is saying is the path to get what we truly want is the path to be the servant of everybody. The whole point of leadership—to be a parent, to be a team manager, to be a teacher in a school— and why we've been given our abilities, our gifts, and our influence is simply to serve others. So we let being a servant touch every area of our lives.

We all know serving opportunities come at sometimes the most inappropriate times as far as we're concerned. They often come as interruptions, an email, a text, or need that you really don't want to answer. We're thinking about our own interests, our own schedules, our own plans, and our own feelings. And the temptation is just to hold off a bit longer until maybe they'll forget. I'll forget. Everybody will forget. Remember that the quality of humility and the quality of our care for others must grow, or it will die on the vine. It must grow out of our devotion to God. If we want to be great in God's kingdom, we need to stay attentive to God, stay close to him, and stay teachable.

Finally, Jesus ends with this powerful illustration, and he uses a child.

He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (vv. 36-37).

There's this young child standing next to Jesus. Jesus took that child in his arms. Do a little background on their culture. Little children were

considered insignificant. Child mortality was unbelievably high, so high that the culture didn't get too attached to the youngest among them, thereby defending themselves against the suffering of grief.

Jesus' point here was to look at this child. This child is insignificant in the culture around you. This child has no power, no accomplishments, and no greatness. This child is weak, ignored, dependent, and has nothing to offer you. Then Jesus says, whoever welcomes one of these in my name welcomes me.

A very natural interpretation of these verses is to take what Jesus is saying to mean that true greatness entails caring for people—the insignificant, vulnerable, and the ones on the margin. Why? Because Jesus views all people as significant and deserving of love. And as far as I know, this recorded teaching of Jesus is the first time in history where children are elevated and valued in society, with the value of little children being promoted. I think Jesus was the first to do this and it's this notion of the most vulnerable, those who are fearfully and wonderfully made, those made still in the womb, as David says in Psalm 1:39.

So here's the main point: When you and I humble ourselves and truly serve the neediest, we are receiving Jesus. We are connecting to Jesus, and we are also receiving our Heavenly Father. I want to add that those who make it their purpose to serve children and the elderly have a special place in God's heart. When you welcome Jesus into your life, welcome children into your life.

Consider impacting children in our CPCKids on Sunday morning. If you want to receive Jesus into your life in a special way, that can't happen anywhere else. Maybe it's tutoring needy kids during the week or engaging with your grandchildren. Because when we welcome a child, we welcome Jesus and the Father in a very special way.

The last thing I want to point out is pride destroys unity. Pride diminishes itself. Pride also rejects God. What is that? What do we mean when we reject children? When we don't serve the most vulnerable, we miss out on that connection. We miss God coming to us through them. And all heaven watches us and how the least among us is being received within our church. So be first to serve. Make it your ambition to serve all others. Ask God to grow your love for him and have that translate into your love for people.

True greatness in God's kingdom doesn't come from the most gifted and famous, but rather, it comes through those who are truly humble and who exercise their humility through a heart of service. Be first to care for the weakest and most vulnerable. Make it your ambition to care. When a popular Christian high school student builds a relationship with someone who doesn't fit in, that's greatness. When a Christian mom listens to a mom from a different culture, that's greatness. When

a Christian manager is buddies with the guy on the factory floor, that's greatness.

Jesus is warning us here. When we push away the lowly, when we push away the elderly, when we push away the children, a person who's different from us, we are pushing away Jesus. But when we learn to jump social barriers, jump clicks, jump age differences, and care for the needy, we receive Jesus. True greatness is what God created us for, and the pathway to that is humble service.

I want to read for you a final verse here from Philippians 2:3-5. It sums it up so beautifully.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Philippians. 2:3-5

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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