

Whoever Wants to Be First, Must Be Last
Mark 9:30-37

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July 28, 2019

What makes a person great? If I asked you to name 1 or 2 great people, who comes to mind? Your answer to these questions depends on your understanding of greatness. So how might we define a great person? One definition goes like this. A great person is **“someone who has done something of major significance or importance.”** Another says a great person is **“someone who has achieved distinction and honor in some field.”** So in Mathematics the name Einstein is great. In cars the name Ferdinand Porsche might be considered great. In St Albert the name Lois Hole would be considered great. Or in music maybe Beethoven or Mozart or Ariana Grande?

While searching for a definition of a great person, I came across a site listing synonyms or words that mean nearly the same thing as great. So here’s a few synonyms for a great person – adventurer; celebrity; conqueror; daredevil; demigod; diva; idol; leader; lion; martyr; model; saint; star; superstar; victor. So think about the 1 or 2 people who came to your mind when asked to name some great people. Do they cut it according to these definitions of greatness? Again, it depends on your understanding of greatness. Would you consider yourself to be a great person?

Now however you or I might define greatness, I wonder if our understanding lines up with Jesus definition? Did you know that He talked about greatness? He taught His disciples about the values He wanted them to adopt. Last week, we saw Jesus correct His disciple’s understanding about the nature of His mission. They expected Jesus to be a triumphant Messiah. They also expected to benefit from His fame to get powerful positions and notoriety. But Jesus said if you want to save your life you must first lose it. Instead of living selfishly, deny yourself and live for the cause of Christ and the gospel by giving your life to it.

Now we come to another scene where Jesus addresses the disciple’s need to learn a new definition of greatness. We need to learn it or be reminded of it. So today I want you to first see Jesus’ definition of greatness. Then I want to discuss one way we can know we’re living according to this difficult definition. Finally, I want you to see what we must ask from God to actually have the strength to live this out.

Mark 9:30-37 (ESV) (Page 713)

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹for 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.” ³²But 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.”

Last week, we left off with Jesus and the disciples in the northern region of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asked them on the way; “who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ.” But, he had a very triumphant view of what this meant. Then we saw Jesus expand their understanding of “the Christ” to include suffering, rejection, being killed and rising after 3 days. Then He explained His expectations of His followers. They needed to give up living for themselves. Instead they needed to give up their lives for Christ and the gospel. In living like that, they would find real life. From there, Jesus took Peter, James and John up onto a mountain. Jesus was transfigured in all his glory before them. On the way down the mountain Jesus heals a boy with an unclean spirit.

Now in verse 30, Mark tells us they went on from there to pass through Galilee. So they are back in Jewish territory. And Jesus did not want anyone to know because He’s teaching His disciples. In verse 31, Jesus expands on the announcement we saw him make last week concerning His suffering and death. “He said to His disciples, “The Son of Man (Him) 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 last week we saw Jesus announce that he would suffer many things, be rejected, be killed and then after 3 days rise again.”

Here he adds the detail that he will be delivered into the hands of men. This could be referring to Judas’ betrayal and delivering Jesus into the hands of the religious leaders. Or it could refer to the religious leaders delivering Jesus over to Pilate. Or it could refer to Pilate delivering Jesus over to be crucified. But it’s another detail about the suffering He will endure when it comes to His final hours. Last week, we saw Peter immediately rebuke Jesus for suggesting this might happen.

But look at the disciples different response in verse 32. “But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.” They may not understand His saying because they still couldn’t get their heads around a suffering and dying Messiah. But it’s also likely they did not understand this “rising after 3 days” statement. In 1st century Judaism, people understood that the resurrection, according to the prophet Daniel, would happen at the end of time. All the dead would

rise and be judged by God. But the resurrection of an individual within history made no sense to them. On top of that, Jesus called Peter “Satan” the last time this subject came up. So it’s understandable why they were afraid to ask him.

They arrive back at Capernaum which is Jesus’ home base of operations. They get into the house and Jesus asks another penetrating question. **“What were you discussing on the way?”** Now to get a sense of this, let’s think about the roads and paths were like for travel during Jesus time. There were probably some good roads where they could walk together basically as a group of 13 men. But there were also some narrow paths where they would likely have to walk single file. You know how sometimes people near the back of the line might have a conversation that people up near the front don’t hear that much. Or you break into smaller groups on a road and have individual conversations.

But Jesus heard their discussion or more accurately heard them arguing. Mark tells us in verse 34 that in response to Jesus’ question, “they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” So here’s the subject of greatness. They argued about who held the highest status. To us, this seems like a supremely arrogant discussion. But, it was not so out of place in their situation. They lived in an honour and shame culture. Your level of higher honour or lower shame dictated your status. In fact, boasting was considered necessary to confirm your social status within the community. Such status was one of the highest values in an empire with slaves and servants.

Your status dictated who was required to do what in a particular setting. If someone with higher status came into your home or a room where you were sitting, you would rise out of honor to them. Of if you were standing, you would bow before them. If a group came into a home or building from a long trip, the slave with the lowest status was required to wash the feet of the travelers. So it seems the disciples argued over who had or would have the highest status when Jesus clearly established His kingdom. Though they were mostly fisherman disciples unknown beyond their village, they looked forward to basking in the glow of Jesus’ power and fame.

We might look at them and shake our heads in disgust. But don’t we all have subtle ways of asserting ourselves and seeking to increase our status in the eyes of others? This happens even in the church. We can be sensitive about whether or not we receive appropriate recognition for some act of service. If our name is forgotten in the church bulletin or newsletter we might let the office know about it. Churches can promote their pastors as celebrities or their ministries as second to none. Christian universities and colleges can compete for status in the Christian world. Denominations can take an unhealthy pride in the fame of their founder.

Sometimes, the status game can show up in simple but distorting ways in the church. Last year, I took a course from New Testament scholar Mark Strauss who taught us about this Gospel. He tells this story in his commentary about his wife and a ministry in their church. “Years ago my wife, Roxanne, was involved in a ministry at our church of signing for the deaf during services. The signers had a music stand where they would place their notes while signing. Often after the service the ushers would take the stand and put it into storage, making it difficult for the signers to find it the next time. So they began putting a note on the stand, saying, “Please leave this stand here for the deaf ministry.” The note was repeatedly ignored and the stand was put away again and again. Evidently the deaf ministry did not have sufficient clout or influence.

One Sunday, however, she signed the note “R. Strauss” short for Roxanne Strauss. The stand never moved an inch after that. The reason, we realized, was the senior pastor of the church was named Richard Strauss (my father), and the ushers must have assumed the note was from him! While the person doing the deaf ministry could be ignored, this was now someone with position and respect. Such partiality, James says, is wrong and contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ.” We can let the same thing happen in the church where we assert ourselves or our ministry above others, or we treat certain people as having status and others are not worth our time. Instead of the church functioning as the body of Christ, it looks more like a series of independent body parts competing for attention.

If Jesus were to ask, “Where are you at in elbowing your way towards greatness?” we might go silent just as the disciples did. We may recognize deep down that Jesus did not cater to hierarchy, status, power and wealth. We may realize that He calls us to live and fellowship in the same way. Yet there’s time we may compete for greatness.

The disciple’s quarrel over their greatness opens the door for Jesus to redefine it. So in verse 35, He sits down in the posture of a teacher. He reveals His definition of greatness. **Jesus definition of greatness – If anyone would be first, he must be last and servant of all.**” Substitute ‘first’ for ‘greatness’ if that helps you. In their culture, the term “first” apparently meant rulers, aristocrats, ruling priests and other persons with authority or influence the great people. But Jesus declares that the path to obtaining this “first” status starts at the bottom or last. So in an honor and shame culture, Jesus says anyone who takes up the last or lowest position is great in His kingdom. That person must be servant of all. So he or she would be the person to wash the traveler’s feet and serve the meal and stand or bow in the presence of everyone else.

This must have come as another shock to the disciples who had just been arguing about which of them was the greatest. If Jesus delivered the nation, they expected their status would rocket upwards. But now Jesus tells them that this will not be the way of His followers. Instead of seeking prestige, status and influence in their society, true greatness involved accepting the position of lowest slave and servant of all. So we have Jesus' definition of greatness, but **what might Jesus' definition of greatness look like in our lives?** This might be one way to know we're approaching Jesus' definition. **We must be willing to serve those who can give nothing back.** Sometimes, we talk about "investing" in people. When we say, we probably have some pretty good motives. But if we approach them with an attitude of investment, what do we expect? It implies there will be a return on investment. It implies that the person will respond, appreciate, take our advice, flourish and maybe pay us back in some way in the future.

But what about serving people who can give nothing back? What about people who have nothing? Will we still serve them? There is something almost sacred about serving someone who cannot give back. Last week, our family received a letter from our sponsor child in Honduras. He is 17 now and we have been sponsoring him for about 8 years. My oldest daughter and son were able to meet him when they were in Honduras.

He cannot repay us financially. But he does send us notes of appreciation along with his artwork. Those are so valuable to us. I have to admit, those notes make a huge difference to me. If I had a sponsor child who never wrote me, I might wonder a little if I was "using my money wisely." Yet would that be a valid reason to stop supporting them? It seems that Jesus instructs us to serve all – even those who can never repay.

Many of you are involved in the lives of people who can give little or nothing. Yet you serve. I think of those of you who minister to aging parents or relatives or spouses. They can't give much. They might not even be able to feed themselves. Yet you are there helping with no one else watching.

Some of you care for a person with unique needs. No major advocate group knows your name. You don't receive ribbons or caregiver of the year awards. You just do it. There are times it's exhausting or discouraging. But, in the eyes of Jesus, you are great.

Many of you minister to children as a parent, grandparent, foster parent or adult in their life. Or you participate in our children's ministries. You don't get a call to go on "America's Got Talent." You don't get paid for it. You just help and you're there for the kids.

Jesus says something profound happens when we do this. In verse 36, He takes a little child and stands him in the midst of them. Then he takes the child in his arms. He says, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” In our day it’s natural to expect that we pay attention to children. We view kids as innocent, vulnerable, cute and even pure. But in the first century they were insignificant and had no social status. So receiving a little child in their situation meant to accept someone of the lowest status and serve them. It involved risking your power and prestige.

Yet Jesus says there is something deeper going on when we receive or welcome a child in Jesus’ name. Somehow, receiving a child is like receiving God. Do you see that in vs. 37? He receives the one who sent me. It involves a willingness to humble ourselves and tend to the very basic needs of young children; food; relief; comfort; correction; redirection; safety. God doesn’t need any of these things. But it seems like the attitude we take to receive a child in Christ’s name is the attitude that we need to take in receiving God – that willingness to humble ourselves. Greatness in the Kingdom of heaven comes with serving all.

Now somewhere there is a balance needed when considering this. There might be some people in our lives in need, who inappropriately keep asking or pushing for more than we can give. Or they poorly manage the resources entrusted to them by another. Or they won’t work. In such situations, it’s legitimate to call them to account. 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12 – “For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such person we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” So there might be times where we need to call people to a greater maturity in their walk.

But overall, we need to get rid of status seeking and thinking ourselves above others. In Christ’s kingdom, to be first you must be last. **So how do we actually live this out? Can we do this in our own strength? No.** This calling requires a heart change where we need Jesus’ heart grown in us. We need His help and His transforming work in us to actually serve all with no desire to be known or praised for it. **To be transformed, we must ask Jesus for a heart that embraces His meaning of greatness.**

In my life, I need to constantly pray for Jesus to give me His eyes and ears so I can see and hear people like He does. One way I approach this is to pray before I go into a setting where I will encounter others. I pray something like; “Lord, help me to see the need of others above my needs. Help me to listen, engage with and identify with those in need like you would. I pray for the Holy Spirit’s empowering to live this out.”

This does not come naturally to me. My default setting is to get my needs met first. So I have to ask for God's help to not give in to the seductive game of fighting for status. For me this also means that I have to pay attention to children; try to get down on their level; give them time to share what's on their heart – even if it doesn't make sense. I need to listen to seniors who might talk a little more softly or quite a bit louder. I must serve those who might only communicate through their tears or pain.

If you work in an office, you might serve all by showing kindness to the cleaning staff. Or it might involve showing consideration for those lower than you in the business hierarchy. If you are retired, it might mean showing concern and consideration for young people who do things differently than you would have done them. Young people Jesus' definition of greatness might mean slowing down to listen to a senior or a child.

If you are in school and you get good grades, to be last and servant of all means that you are humble about your achievements. It might mean that you don't look down on those who get lesser grades than you and instead you treat them as an equal. If you're athletic, it means you don't look down on those who aren't. If you strong, you don't look down on the weak.

Younger people – In Jesus eyes, it's not very important for you to get 20 or 50 or 100 likes on your post compared serving those in need.

When we struggle to accept Jesus' definition of greatness for us, we need to remember where we were before Jesus came along. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We followed the course of this world. We used to live in the passions of our flesh; we were by nature children of wrath. We couldn't do anything to get ourselves out of that state. We were the last.

Then the first, the king of kings and lord of lords came along – Jesus Christ. And, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being found in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” That was the lowest of the lowest status in that 1st century culture. A crucified person offended the Gentiles and led the Jews to believe that person was cursed by God. Then he was highly exalted by God and given the name above every name. But that didn't result in Him ignoring us who were dead. He called out to us. He raised us up. He made us alive in Himself. It's by grace we have been saved through faith. When we begin to think

we're above caring for them, talking to them, noticing them, we need to remember where we came from, how lost we were and who rescued us. Then it is much more likely that we will be open to the Holy Spirit's work in us of conforming us to the likeness of Christ.

You may be here today and never have heard of Jesus and His definition of greatness. But it resonates with you. Yes, people who do accomplish remarkable feats in a particular field are great in one sense. But Jesus' definition of greatness reveals something you sense has real depth. You've heard that Jesus relinquished His status so that you might be rescued from a life enslaved to sin and that endless pursuit of fighting for status. Will you receive all He purchased and gave for you even though you can never pay Him back? Will you receive Him and trust your life to Him? If so, I invite you to receive Him now in prayer. "Lord Jesus, I have been resisting you all my life. But I finally see my lostness and need for you to raise me up. I turn away from my old life. I put the trust of my life on you. I pray that you will come in and give me new life in you. Then begin your work of transforming me to be great by being last and servant of all." If you have just prayed that, will you let me know, and make sure that you tell someone about that so they can encourage you and pray with you?

Let's conclude reframing the question. Who are one or two great people in your life according to Jesus' definition of greatness, who comes to mind? Thank Him for bringing those people into your life. Thank you for all of you who are living as servants of all. Jesus affirms that you are being faithful to His calling. Let us all ask the Lord to continue to change our hearts from seeking worldly greatness to living out kingdom greatness.