

Sermon for September 22, 2024 - 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 9:30–37 EHV

Theme: **Jesus teaches us about greatness.**

- 1) His own
- 2) Our own.

³⁰*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know this, ³¹because he was teaching his disciples. He told them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise.”*

³²*But they did not understand the statement and were afraid to ask him about it.*

³³*They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they remained silent, because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me.”*

How would you define “greatness?” Is it being an expert in your field to whom everyone should listen? Perhaps you envision it as receiving the recognition or praise you feel you deserve for your ideas and contributions. Maybe you picture greatness as having influence with the movers and shakers in the world or being entrusted with a position of public authority.

Humanity defines and illustrates “greatness” in numerous ways, but none of them align with God’s definition and example. Worse still, our human notions of greatness often prevent us from listening to Jesus and reflecting his love in our lives.

Therefore, with the Gospel of Mark as our guide, let us **listen to Jesus teach us the truth about greatness: First regarding His own and then our own.**

Part One: Jesus teaches the truth about his greatness.

Our text takes place shortly after Jesus’ Transfiguration when Peter, James, and John witnessed His divine glory as He spoke with Moses and Elijah about his imminent departure. Shortly after that event, Jesus began his last journey to Jerusalem, where He would be crucified. We read:

³⁰*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know this, ³¹because he was teaching his disciples.*

Jesus kept away from the crowds because He needed his disciples to understand what was about to happen. He had tried to explain everything once before when He asked his disciples who they thought He was. At that time, Peter had answered for all of them by saying that He was the Christ.

Jesus went on to explain what that meant, but Peter didn't want to hear it. Why? Because of his preconceived notions about how the Christ should accomplish his work. On that occasion, Peter even went so far as to contradict Jesus strongly for talking about his impending suffering and death. That, in turn, caused Jesus to rebuke Peter in front of the other disciples.ⁱ

Because Jesus knew the disciples still didn't understand the nature of His work, He took the opportunity to teach them again.

He told them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise."

Jesus' words are simple enough. I don't think he could be any clearer about what the disciples should expect. When Jesus called himself the "Son of Man," He used a title for the Messiah found in the book of Daniel.ⁱⁱ In that prophecy, the Son of Man is given eternal dominion over all creation. When the disciples imagined Jesus' greatness as the Christ, they likely envisioned this prophecy of glory.

But, as many other prophecies of the Old Testament had indicated, the path to glory for the Messiah was paved with pain.ⁱⁱⁱ In His Father's eyes, Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection are the source of his greatness. Why? Because he did these things in submission to his Father's will to forgive our sins, reconcile us to God, and bestow upon all who believe in Him an everlasting inheritance that cannot fade, spoil, or perish.^{iv} Yes, Jesus' greatness lies in the fact that he gave up all heavenly glory to save us out of reverent obedience to His Father's will.

³²*But [the disciples] did not understand [Jesus'] statement.*

Jesus' words regarding his suffering, death, and resurrection were clear, so why didn't the disciples understand them? Probably because they didn't want to understand them. Yes, they loved Jesus and believed he was the Christ. The problem was that they didn't want to believe that he would have to suffer such an ignominious death as crucifixion. After all, if such a fate befell their master, what would become of them, His disciples?

Therefore, they *were afraid to ask him about it.*

Why were the disciples afraid to ask Jesus about his statement? Probably because they were afraid, he would speak more about his humility, suffering, and death — things they didn't want to hear because it contradicted their opinion on how he should accomplish his mission as the Messiah.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, how often aren't we like the disciples — allowing our ideas of "how things should be" prevent us from listening to Jesus? How often aren't we afraid to really dig into the Bible regarding a hard doctrine because we might not like the answer? I will be honest with you: I think such fear keeps us from asking Jesus in prayer and listening to him speak to us through His Word more than we would like to admit. We are so comfortable living within our own opinions of wherein Christ's "greatness" lies and what Christianity should be like that we would rather not talk about the Bible's "uncomfortable" teachings that challenge our preconceived notions about our faith.

But here's the thing: whenever fear stops us from asking Jesus "uncomfortable" questions, we miss out on the deep understanding and comfort He offers us through His Word. Why? Because everything in the Bible – even the stuff that may seem tough to accept - is intended to lead us to Jesus and the salvation He won for us. We miss out on finding comfort in His true greatness and the hope it offers us – all because we're too caught up in our misleading thoughts and opinions.

Part Two: Jesus teaches the truth about our greatness.

Our text continues: ³³*They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"* ³⁴*But they remained silent, because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.*

Sometimes, it's only when we're directly confronted with our own words that we realize how foolish they are. That certainly was the case with the disciples. Just think: Jesus, their teacher, was talking about how he was going to be betrayed, die, and come back to life, and they were arguing about who was the most important. It's no wonder they didn't want to tell him what they were arguing about on their trip. However, from what we can gather from the other Gospels, it seems as if He did not let the disciples off the hook until they *approached Jesus and asked, "Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*^v

³⁵*Jesus sat down [thereby taking the position Rabbis took when they were about to teach an important lesson], called the Twelve, and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all."*

In God's eyes, greatness isn't about wielding authority, exerting influence, seeking honour, or achieving personal gain. Instead, it's all about showing forgiveness, love, and service. Divine wisdom and understanding compels us to prioritize the needs and emotions of others ahead of our own for Jesus' sake. The apostle James eloquently expressed this sentiment in our epistle reading:

¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom... the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.*^{vi}

Why does God consider such qualities great? Because they reflect the way He loved us in Christ, as St. Paul once wrote:

⁵*Indeed, let this attitude be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. ⁶Though he was by nature God, he did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed, ⁷but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant. When he was born in human likeness, and his appearance was like that of any other man, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.*^{vii}

Yes, in God's eyes, true greatness is demonstrated by everything Jesus did to save us. Therefore, our "greatness" in God's eyes consists of our voluntary expressions of Christlike love towards others. What God values are things like showing mercy, helping those in need, bearing each other's burdens, showing hospitality, a willingness to yield, and forgiving others just as Jesus forgave you.

³⁶Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me."

In the ancient world, little children did not have much rank or importance, and yet Jesus found joy in their presence. He never felt his time was too precious to spend time with them, and neither should we.

But what exactly does Jesus mean when he says, "*Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me*"? To do anything in Jesus' name is to do it for his glory. Therefore, welcoming a child in Jesus' name means recognizing every child as one for whom Jesus died. It means loving children—caring for and nurturing them as Jesus loves us. Our time is not too valuable for a child or, for that matter, any other who the world might consider less important. Because of what Jesus did for all, no one is too insignificant for our time, love, and attention.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you now understand what God considers great? It is not positions of power, influence, or authority. It is not about worldly prestige, glory, and honour. What God considers great is voluntary, sacrificial service that benefits others for Jesus' sake. It is bearing with the burdens of others, forgiving them as, in Christ, God forgave you. In the eyes of our Saviour, greatness is all about showing the same love He showed us. This truth is evident in the prophecy Jesus gave concerning the end of the world when He will declare:

³⁴ ... 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶I was lacking clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me ... Amen I tell you: Just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.'^{viii}

Yes, humbly putting others ahead of ourselves, for Christ's sake, is the essence of true greatness. Sadly, that is also a greatness that all of us often fail to pursue. For this, we ought to repent – looking to Jesus for forgiveness and help. And Jesus freely grants us forgiveness and help. Through His suffering, death, and resurrection, He redeemed us from all sin. Through the preaching of the Gospel, He welcomed us into his kingdom. We belong to him. Therefore, in the peace of Christ's forgiveness, let us ask Jesus to send us the Holy Spirit and grant us the wisdom that is from above^{ix} so that we might freely love, welcome, and serve others, just as He freely loves, welcomes, and serves us. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Mark 8:27-38

ⁱⁱ Cf. Daniel 7:13-14

ⁱⁱⁱ E.g., Isaiah 52:13-53:12

^{iv} Cf. 1 Peter 1:3-4

^v Matthew 18:1 EHV

^{vi} James 3:13,17 NKJV

^{vii} Philippians 2:5-9 EHV

^{viii} Matthew 25:34-36, 40 EHV

^{ix} Cf. James 1:5 & 3:13,17