

THE PATH TO GREATNESS

Gospel of Mark

INTRODUCTION: Greatest Person in the 20th Century

Who would you say is the greatest person in the 20th century?

Some of you, I imagine, thought instantly of Winston Churchill—the British Prime Minister who faced down Adolf Hitler. Maybe you thought of the physicist, Albert Einstein, or the father of the computer and WW2 code-breaker Alan Turing, or the first human to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong.

And even if you didn't think of one of these names, I'd bet that the person you thought of is known for their great triumphs, their achievements, their talents and abilities.

We've come to equate greatness with accomplishments, aptitude and genius. But as we turn to the 9th chapter of Mark's gospel, we find ourselves in the middle of what Jesus Christ, the Son of God had to say about greatness. And it's nothing like what we've come to expect.

CONTEXT/BRIDGE THE GAP:

Mark was a travelling companion of the Apostle Peter and he wrote this gospel account as Peter was preaching in Rome. His goal in this narrative is to help you and me see and know the real Jesus. Who was he? Why's he so important? And he wants us to follow Jesus as a disciple. In other words—he wants us to believe in and serve Jesus as our God and Lord. Mark 9 is just over halfway through the account and Jesus has just turned with his 12 disciples to go to Jerusalem.

As their master, he's preparing them for his imminent departure. He knows that he's going to Jerusalem to be crucified according to the eternal plan of God. And as he teaches his disciples about the path to true greatness, we learn 4 lessons:

SIGNPOSTS:

1. Jesus Exposes Our Desire for Greatness
2. Jesus Reverses Our Expectations of Greatness
3. Jesus Warns Us of Threats to True Greatness
4. Jesus is the Greatness We Need

Let's now read Mark 9:30 -

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.”

This is the Word of the Lord. The first lesson we learn on the path to greatness is this:

1. JESUS EXPOSES OUR HUNGER FOR GREATNESS

Explanation:

- v. 33 Jesus asks what they were discussing.
- “He asked them” imperfect. He kept on asking.
- “They kept silent” – imperfect—they kept refusing to answer. They didn’t want to say.
- They had been arguing about who was the greatest among them. Why was this the argument?
 - Transfiguration – Peter, James, John
 - Jockeying for cabinet seats in the Messiah’s administration
 - Or worse, Jesus in v. 31 had predicted his death and they were arguing over who the new leader would be.

Jesus obviously knew what the argument had been. This is an argument we all have with one another even from the youngest age. We all want greatness. Every single person wants status, wants honor, wants to be perceived as valuable and worthy.

Illustrate: Competition in the Homesley Family.

- Child—remain nameless.
- Bingo
- I Hate Losing!

This is all of us! I hate losing. I hate not being noticed.

2. JESUS REVERSES OUR EXPECTATIONS OF GREATNESS

He reverses our expectations of greatness by giving us a principle and an illustration.

The Principle of Servant Greatness

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.”

- The people who follow Jesus are characterized, not as lords or celebrities... but as servants.
- Servant of All – diakonos. Same word we get the word deacon from.
- Least of All – John 3:30
- In other words, greatness isn’t measured by power. It’s measured by how you use your power to serve.
- It isn’t measured by your knowledge, but how you use your knowledge to serve.
- It isn’t measured by your net worth, or social connections, or accomplishments—but how you have leveraged everything God has given to you for the service of others.

Illustrates the Principle of Servant Greatness

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.”

This is not the place where Jesus tells us to become childlike—that’s another passage. Here he’s saying, “Become the kind of person who receives a child.” What does that mean?

Well, the ancient world was incredibly stratified when it came to social class. Emperor was at the top. There was an aristocratic class and a working class. There were indentured servants and slaves. And everyone jockeyed for position and status. And the more you could associate with those higher in the social structure than you the higher your own status would rise.

But children were at the very bottom of the social structure. They had little to no rights. No status.

And beyond that, children are notoriously ungrateful. They don’t recognize half of what their parents do for them. And even if they do, they aren’t able to pay you back or advance your goals. They can’t help you build your brand, or promote your reputation.

Do you see what Jesus is saying? He’s saying you find out a person’s true greatness by watching how well they treat those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. You see true greatness by watching how well someone treats those who are unappreciative. How do you treat those who can’t help you advance your goals?

Here’s what he’s saying:

- Are you seeking to be served and be first? Or have you embraced the radicalness of servanthood?
- When you serve others, are you secretly calculating your service based on how it might advantage you?

- When you serve others and they don’t pay you back or even say thanks, do you feel robbed?

This is a complete reversal of our expectations.

3. JESUS WARNS US OF THREATS TO TRUE GREATNESS

In vs. 38-50 Three Threats to Greatness. We must watch our: Teamwork, our Teaching, and our Temptations

Teamwork

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.

Explanation:

- The first threat to true greatness is a competitive spirit.
- Why did the disciples try to stop this man? “Because he was not following us.” They are comparing themselves to him and they are trying to control him.
- And if he will not do it their way they try and shut him down.
- They’d rather see no work of God than to see one that wasn’t done the way they want it done.

Application:

- You'll never become a servant if you're constantly making comparisons and trying to maintain control of your own status.
- Christians—there are many different denominations. And while all true believers agree on the essentials of the faith—there is healthy and vigorous disagreements on things like: baptism, the end times, whether we should have contemporary music or traditional music.
- Don't allow minor differences outweigh the major similarities.
- Is your attitude exclusive, narrow, clubish? Or do you have the informed tolerance of Christ, which rejoices when his name is glorified?
- Are you recognizing the grace of Christ in the ministry of others?

And let me make a quick side-note to those who are not Christians: I know it's popular to believe that the disciples and other Christians long after these events fabricated these stories about Jesus to try to gain a following and accrue power.

But consider this—if the disciples fabricated all of this—why do they constantly show themselves in all their flaws, bad attitudes, and misunderstandings?

In these 20 verses Jesus has to correct them twice. Now, listen... if you were starting a religion and wanted to convince people to follow you—the last thing you would do is make the leaders of your religion sound jealous, conniving and pompous. But they did. Mark includes all these flaws. Why?

It's because all those flaws really were there. This really happened. And these events utterly changed these disciples. It made them humble, generous, and patient.

Example & Teaching

⁴² “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

Explain:

- Our lives are living examples. Jesus is saying whether by explicit teaching, or by your living example, if you cause someone who follows him to stumble—or if you lead them into error, it would be better for a millstone to be hung around your neck and cast into the sea.
- Millstone – giant grinding wheel pulled by a donkey.
- Jesus is saying that if you lead someone who is young in their faith astray—either by word or example—then the worst physical death imaginable is preferable to what you will suffer when you fall into the hands of God.
- It demonstrates how precious new Christians are to Christ. If you are taking those first few steps of faith—Christ loves you. He cares for you.
- It also demonstrates the importance of always having a learner's heart. Never being satisfied with our current level of knowledge of Christ.
 - There are Bible books you haven't mastered.
 - There are Christians disciplines you haven't learned: Bible reading, prayer, evangelism, hospitality.
 - There are Christian doctrines you haven't studied.

- That's one of the reasons we have Equipping Hour. Right now, we're all studying prayer together.
- That's why we're starting small groups... so you can know and learn from other Christians.

Temptations

⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' ⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

- Does this language shock you? It should.
- Hyperbole. Isn't being literal.
- Even if we took Jesus literally it wouldn't fix the problem... why? because the problem of sin isn't in your eye or hand. It's in your heart.
- Our desires of corrupted.
- So what is Jesus saying here?
- The hand symbolizes what we do, the foot where we go, and the eye what we see.
- So, if you are tempted by what you see—behave as if you had your eyes plucked out and thrown away.
- Act as if your hands had been cut off.
- If you are tempted to go places you ought not go—act as if your feet were cut off.

- This command is also a reminder that we cannot become the people we're called to be on our own. Who can cut off their own hand? You can't bring yourself to do it.
- In our fight against temptation—we need one another. We need brothers and sisters in Christ who can stand beside us encouraging us, confronting us.

So, we've seen Jesus expose our desire for greatness, he reverses our expectations and warns us of threats to greatness. Finally...

4. JESUS IS THE GREATNESS WE NEED

Go back to the beginning of the passage:

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."

Now let me tell you what's so striking about these words. Jesus calls himself "The Son of Man." In fact, that's his favorite term for himself. "The Son of Man." Where does that come from? It comes from the Old Testament book of Daniel, chapter 7:

The prophet Daniel had a vision of God's glory and greatness....

¹³ "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man,

and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.

14And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.

The Son of Man is given dominion and glory and a kingdom.
The nations serve him. It's everlasting! Do you know what
Jesus is saying when he claims this title? "I'm the greatest. I
hold the highest place—the highest status.

I'm the Son of Man—and I'm going to be handed over to evil
men to be killed.

Now listen—the only way that the one who has all dominion
could be killed is if he willingly allowed it to happen.

Jesus is saying, "Though I'm the greatest, I'm willingly
becoming the least. I'm becoming the servant of all."

And he didn't just serve the powerful or the wealthy or those
with status. He served those at the bottom of the spiritual
hierarchy. You and me. He served those with no status, those
who would not appreciate what he did, those who couldn't
possibly pay him back.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give
his life a ransom for many.

Jesus gave up his status, his reputation. He gave up his home.
He gave up the glory he had in heaven to come and bear your
sin on the cross.

Jesus doesn't need anything from you. You can't give him
anything he doesn't already have. He doesn't stand to gain any
status by serving you. So why did he come and die?

Simply because he loves you.

And let me tell you:

If you know that the one who was greatest has set his love on
you and served you—it's the only greatness you'll ever need.
It's the only approval, the only welcome that will satisfy.

If you have him, at the end of the day, you won't need
anything else. And if you have him it will free you to serve
others without calculating your own advantages.

If you know you have the love of Christ, you don't cling to the
love of anyone else as if your life depended on it.

He is the greatness that you need.