

HOW TO BE THE GREATEST

Mark 9:30-37

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

September 23, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 9, verses 30 through 37. It is on page 715 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us how to be the greatest. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Mark 9, beginning at verse 30, we read in Jesus' name.

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."**

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't give you a lot of "how-to" sermons. I know they're popular, and I know people want them. I'm not saying any of *you* want them. If you did, you might be going to a different church already. I know that "how-to" sermons are the secret to church growth. If someone can teach us how to have a better marriage, or how to raise perfect kids, or how to get a promotion at work, that guy gains a following. And if the pastor can make it so that we don't have to work too hard at it, that would be ideal.

But the Bible isn't a "how-to" manual, and Christianity isn't a "how-to" religion. It's primarily about the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, sometimes there is some practical "how-to" advice. And Jesus gives us some in this passage. In fact, he skips all the little and medium-sized stuff and jumps right to the big one. He teaches us how to be the greatest. So if you're waiting for a "how-to" message, that the good news. The bad news is, it's not what you think, and it's definitely not what you want.

Jesus is on a journey with his disciples. They're going to Capernaum for the last time before Jesus goes to Jerusalem and the cross. Capernaum, by the way, had become Jesus' hometown. This was his base of operations.

So Jesus was well-known in this area, but he specifically tries to avoid being noticed. He has some important teaching for his disciples, and he doesn't want to be interrupted. This doctrinal

teaching is even more important than healing the sick or casting out demons. It's something he had told them before (8:31), and he'll have to keep teaching it (10:33-34), because they just don't get it. It's the necessity of his death and resurrection.

Jesus says 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."** (9:31). Now he didn't just say this once and then drop it. The text says he was teaching this to them. It was continual. So Jesus spoke these exact words to them, and he kept trying to explain it to them. But they didn't get it.

And that's kind of funny, because, what is there to get? It's not like the parables, where the meaning of Jesus' words were sometimes hidden in stories. The words are very plain and matter-of-fact. **"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."** It means exactly what it says. But they don't get it because they can't believe Jesus actually means what he says. The words are plain enough, but the plan makes no sense.

It would be like a CEO saying to his employees, "We're going to sell all of our products at half of cost, and we're going to make money hand over fist." His employees would be very confused, not because they don't understand the plain meaning of his words, but because they *do* understand the plain meaning of the words, and the plan makes no sense. It doesn't add up to anything that corresponds to reality.

So the disciples are confused, not because they don't understand the plain meaning of the words. They are confused precisely because they *do* understand the plain meaning of Jesus' words, and they don't correspond to anything in reality. This is not the way things work.

Jesus is supposed to be the king they've been waiting for. He is supposed to be the one to restore the fortunes of Israel. Everything the disciples have been doing with Jesus for the last three years is for this very purpose—so that they might reign with him in his kingdom when he assumes his throne.

This is why they were arguing about who is the greatest. Think about this: They're getting in on the ground floor of this Messianic Kingdom thing. With every new miracle, Jesus' fame grows, and the kingdom is looking more and more like a real possibility. They're ready to ride the elevator to the top with Jesus, so they're arguing about which of the twelve will be the greatest when the elevator reaches the top. But Jesus is talking about deep-sixing the thing. And it just makes no sense. You can't be king when you're dead.

They're thinking about everything in worldly terms. But the world is a perversion of the way God designed it. It's not supposed to be this way.

So Jesus teaches them something that sounds kind of backward. But it's not really backward. It's this world that is backward. Jesus says, **"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all"** (9:35). The servant of all is really the greatest of all. That's the way it is in the Kingdom of God, and that's the way God desires for us to live in this life.

Now our sinful nature is going to want to grab onto this and say, "Okay, here's what I have to do if I really want to be the greatest. All I have to do is serve other people. All I have to do is pretend to be humble, and then everyone else will see how great I am." But that's not how it works. Serving others is not a means to an end in order to become the greatest. That's just selfish. If you act humble in order for other people to notice your humility, that's not really

humility. Even if no one else sees through it, God will. The kind of service Jesus is talking about is serving others for *their* sake, not our own.

God's will is that we would actually delight in serving others, not because there's any recognition or glory in it for us, but simply for the sake of the people we serve. That's the way it is for Christ. Christ delighted to humble himself and serve us, not for the sake of his own glory, but for the sake of us who are saved by his service. And God's will is that we would delight in serving others the same way. But we just can't imagine delighting in humility and service. It doesn't seem enjoyable to us.

The place where I think we get tripped up in our minds is that we assume God must crave glory and recognition as much as we do. But God is not like us. God delights in virtue, and the highest virtue is love (1 Cor. 13:13). Not love like the world talks about it. When the world talks about love, it usually means enjoyment or pleasure. That kind of love is just a stronger word for "like." It's really completely selfish. But that's not the kind of love the Bible talks about. The Bible kind of love—the God kind of love—is self-sacrifice and service. It means putting someone else ahead of yourself. This is the highest virtue, and this is the virtue that best defines God. That's why the Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

So God, being perfectly good and virtuous, delights in what is good and virtuous, even if it means unfathomable pain and anguish for himself. Jesus actually delights in the cross, not in the sense that he enjoys the pain, but in the sense that he delights in the service he is performing. He doesn't think the cross is fun. It's not like Jesus is hanging up there on the cross saying, "Hey guys, you should try this; it's even more fun than go karts." No; Jesus delights in the *virtue* of it. He delights in the service he is rendering for us. That is how Jesus delights in the cross. God delights to serve because his very nature is love. Giving himself for the sake of his creatures is the most natural thing for him to do.

And on the Last Day, when we are raised from the dead and transformed after the image of Jesus Christ, we will delight in the exact same things. This is hard for us to fathom, but our desires will actually be transformed. Right now, in our sin, we delight in glory, and praise, and, if possible, being the greatest. These are the things we want, and we can't imagine our desires being any other way.

So when we think about the new creation and whether or not we will like it, we evaluate it according to our current desires. We assume we will still have the same desires. We assume that we will still want glory and honor for ourselves. But we need to recognize that in the new creation our desires will be transformed. Instead of desiring glory for ourselves, which is selfish and sinful, our desires will be completely transformed to God's standard of virtue. In the new creation we will actually delight to put ourselves last and be a servant to all, because that is the nature of God, and we will be remade in his image.

But this is not simply an ideal we are waiting for in the new creation. God desires that we live this way now. Even though it means fighting against our natural desires, God's will is that we make ourselves last of all and be a servant of all. And we should not view this as a means to an end in order to glorify ourselves in a back door kind of way. Instead, we should see service as an end in itself.

And you might actually find this to be satisfying, or you might not; I don't really know. But there are some things in life that we find satisfying, even if they're not fun. Imagine there are two boys who graduate high school. During the summer the first boy stays home to play video

games and eat ice cream all day. He does that because it sounds like fun. The second boy joins the army and goes to basic training. In the middle of the summer he can't remember why he did it. But at the end of the summer, that boy is satisfied with what he did, while the first one just tries to forget about how he wasted his summer. Even though the second boy didn't enjoy crawling around in the mud and being yelled at, he is satisfied, because he accomplished something, and he prepared himself for service. So sometimes, at least, we are satisfied by putting others ahead of ourselves and serving.

But sometimes there's no feeling of satisfaction and there's no recognition for what we do. But God's will is still the same. He still desires that we consider ourselves last and put others ahead of ourselves.

The illustration Jesus gives is a little child. "He took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me' " (9:36-37).

To receive this child means to serve him. It's along the lines of adopting an orphan or a foster child. It takes self-sacrifice and a lot of work. The idea is that you place this little child and his needs ahead of yourself. You actually consider this child to be more important than yourself.

Now think about this kind of sacrifice and commitment in contrast to the disciples' argument about who is the greatest. They were arguing about who would be the greatest in the Messianic Kingdom—the throne they hoped Jesus would establish. They were thinking in terms of worldly prestige and honor. It's actually very similar to how we think about worldly greatness, whether it's in sports or business or whatever. If you want to rise to the top in the business world or whatever kind of career you have, you have to dedicate yourself to it completely, because you know a lot of other people are dedicating themselves to being the best. If you're going to beat them, you have to dedicate yourself even more. But if you start receiving orphans and foster children, and if you start treating them as if they are more important than you are, you have to give up your dream of being the greatest in other areas of your life. And in fact, everything else you do in life, whether it's your career or something else, those things simply become your means of serving this child. You can't spend eighty hours a week at the office just because you want to make more money than they guy down the hall.

God's idea of greatness is completely different from the world's idea. In the eyes of the world, the guy who goes out and grabs what he can for himself is the greatest. He makes the most money and wins the most trophies. In the Kingdom of God, this man is nothing. Think about how counter-cultural that is. The most successful person in the world is nothing in the Kingdom of God. Meanwhile, the mom who devotes herself completely to her children is great. She receives little or no recognition from the world, but she is great in the Kingdom of God, because she has given herself to someone smaller and weaker.

Now this doesn't mean that everyone needs to be a stay-at-home mom or dad. That's a logical impossibility, and not everyone is given children. The point is simply that, wherever God has placed you in life, you find the neediest person there and serve that person. The one who serves the neediest is truly first in the Kingdom of God.

And this, of course, brings us back around to Christ and the need for him to be delivered into the hands of men, to be killed, and to rise after three days. Jesus practices what he

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preaches. If it's radical for full-grown humans to become servants to miniature humans, then it's even more radical for the righteous and all-powerful God of the universe to stoop down and become the servant of his rebellious creatures. But this is what he did.

Imagine this: Your God and King, the Lord Jesus Christ, is your Servant. This isn't how we naturally think of God. It might even seem a bit demeaning. At the very least it sounds completely backward. But this is the only natural way for God to think of himself, because God is love. Giving himself up in order to serve his rebellious creatures is the most natural thing for God to do.

So think about the cross. Think about the actual physical event of Jesus' crucifixion. Think about a thirty-three-year-old condemned criminal, beaten senseless, stripped of his clothing, bleeding from virtually every square inch on his body, spit upon, and mocked by strangers as they walk by. Fix that image in your mind. Now hear this: There never has been and never will be a clearer revelation of who God is.

And I hope you realize how ridiculous that sounds. Worldly wisdom will never recognize the greatness of that image. This is so unnatural to us. When we think about God, we tend to think about him in terms of what we desire to be: glorious and powerful and exalted. And God certainly is all those things, and sometimes he reveals himself in those ways. But none of those things are his defining characteristic. God's defining characteristic is love. And that makes the cross the clearest revelation there could ever be of who God is. He has made himself the least. He has made himself the servant of all. Therefore, he is first and the greatest of all. The cross is his glory, and it is because of the cross that our God is worthy of all praise and honor. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.