

Who is the Greatest?

- Mark 9:30-37
- Some of you are old enough to remember the man who stood in the ring with both hands raised and yelled, “I am the greatest!” Muhammad Ali. His face has appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* more time than any other athlete besides Michael Jordan. 3-time world champion heavyweight boxer. “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.” Sportswriter Gary Smith went to see Ali in 1988, seven years after he had retired. The ex-champion escorted Smith to a barn beside his farmhouse. On the floor, leaning against the wall, were pictures of Ali in his prime. Sculpted body. Championship belt held high, the “thrilla in Manila.” But on the pictures were white streaks—bird droppings. Ali looked into the rafters where the pigeons were roosting. Then he did something interesting: perhaps an act of closure or surrender to faded glory: he turned the pictures, one by one, to face the wall. “I had the world,” he said, “and it wasn’t nothing. Look now.” From the mountaintop to the valley.
- A walk with Jesus can take us from the mountaintop one minute to the lowest valley the next. Jesus was glorified on the Mount of Transfiguration and Peter, James and John saw him in all his splendor, a foreshadow of what was to come. Mountaintop! Then, moments after leaving that scene, Jesus told the three disciples to keep quiet about what they had seen until after he had been raised from the dead. Valley! Then they entered a battle zone and Jesus commanded a demon to leave a boy and then raised him up. Mountaintop!
- This passage opens with, “they went on from there.” And Jesus is longing for some private time with his disciples, so you get the sense that they are alone as they pass through Galilee for the last time. He teaches them again that he, the Son of Man, had come to die. He will be delivered into the hands of men. Delivered by Judas, we know, but ultimately delivered by God the Father. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise. Delivered by God into death at the hands of all humanity, and then delivered by God from death into resurrection for all who believe. That is the Gospel.
- Verse 32: But the disciples still did not understand and were afraid to ask Jesus. They were back in that valley.
- Isn’t life like that for each of us in Christ? We have been on the mountaintop and we have been in the valley, and last year was a microcosm of that for this body of believers. We experienced the mountaintop with families who welcomed new babies. New life! And, we were on the mountaintop with families who welcomed new believers. New life in Christ! And honestly, I believe every Sunday we were able to gather and celebrate the risen Savior was a mountaintop experience. We see Jesus high and lifted up and we celebrate every Sunday that he is Lord and we are his people.
- But we have also been in the valley this year. We have suffered when someone we love in the body has suffered, whether it was with cancer or some other disease, or because of the loss of a loved one. We have had families we love move on to other places to serve and to worship, and though that can be a cause for celebration, as God is sovereign over his people, it is a painful valley nonetheless for those who are left behind. Mountaintops and valleys in 2020 and it will be the same in 2021. Jesus knows that of us, just as he knew the struggle of his disciples then. They did not understand his talk about dying,

being killed, and then being raised again. Jesus will wait until they are in a quiet place, in the house in Capernaum, again, to teach them a critical lesson. Let's look at it under these three main points: Context, Contrast, and Call.

- **Context (verses 33-34)**

- "What were you discussing on the way?" Jesus knew the answer to the question he asked. He always does. But the disciples stood silent before him, ashamed perhaps to admit that they had been arguing over who among them would be the greatest. More on that to come but consider the context! They had just been told, again, that Jesus was getting ready to be delivered over and killed. At this point, Jesus has, as Luke writes, "set his face like flint to go to Jerusalem." This was his last time in Galilee, his last time in Capernaum. He had done what the Father had sent him to Galilee to do and now he had to do what the Father is sending him to Judea to do. He had to go and die. He had told his disciples, in a sense, that all of time was about to be divided at a cross and an empty tomb, when death and hell would be defeated and salvation would be won for God's people. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and to win them he had to die as our sacrifice and be resurrected as our redeemer.
- And what were the disciples doing as they heard that news, walking along with Jesus? Thinking about themselves. Oh, God help us! Isn't that exactly what we tend to do? Every church fight comes down to a battle over who is the greatest. Who is more important or whose opinions are most worth listening to. Every marriage fight, same thing. Every conflict pits two people or two groups against one another as they battle for control. Did you ever play King of the Mountain as a child? I loved that game, where there's one guy at the top of the mountain and the rest of the guys are trying to be there, but you have to throw the other guy off the mountain in order to be king. I say guy, because I never saw girls play this. Maybe they did. But that's what the disciples are doing as they argue, not speculate, argue, over who is the greatest, most important, most worthy of honor. What a contrast.

- **Contrast (verse 35)**

- The contrast between Jesus' humility and the disciples' desire for recognition and position could not be any more jarring. James Edwards says it like this: "Jesus speaks of surrendering his life; the disciples speak of fulfilling theirs. He counts the cost of discipleship; they count its assets."
- They lived in a world very much like ours today, when it comes to status and rank and standing in the community. The ones with the most clout got the best seats at the event, and the closest table to the front at the dinner. One document discovered in Qumran in 1947, when the dead sea scrolls were found, was about the Rule of the Community in the century before and the century after Christ came. This group in Qumran in the first century thought of themselves as the remnant of Israel. The document gave a proper order of procession for the people entering the congregation, the priests first, then the Levites, then all the people, in groups of importance, "so that all the children of Israel may know their standing in God's community in conformity with the eternal plan. And no one shall move down from his rank nor move up from the place of his lot." Rank. Status. Importance. King of the Mountain. That kind of thinking had affected the

disciples and they brought their ambitions into their fellowship with Jesus. What does he do?

- He sits down. He calls them to himself. This was the posture of a teacher who has authority. Then he shocks them with the contrast he offers. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Servants? Servants are last, not first! The Greek attitude toward serving others could be summed up by Plato's question, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?" But Jesus turns the idea of greatness on his head, and the idea of servanthood right-side up. Again, Edwards helps us with this: "Jesus does not exactly repudiate prominence and greatness, but he redefines them. The challenge is to be great in the things that matter to God. Nothing is greater in God's eyes than giving, and no vocation affords the opportunity to give more than that of a servant."
- That changes the playing field! It means that anyone can be great in the eyes of God, simply by serving others. But a true servant does not have greatness in mind, but love. He or she understands that serving others is simply a visible picture of the reality of God's love. Serving others is the primary way we fulfill the ministry and the mission we have been given by Jesus. He gives us spiritual gifts to help us in that, but those, too, are not for our gain but for other's gain and for God's glory! That leads us to the call.
- **Call (verses 36-37)**
- Jesus had told them the truth. Now he illustrates it. He even acts it out for them. And for us. He put a little child in the middle of the disciples, and took him into his arms, and said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."
- We must not think that Greek and Jewish societies worshiped youth as we tend to do today. Or that they honored and protected children. No, just the opposite. Children were the least, the last and the lowest. Mostly they were not even seen, much less received, respected and cared for. We read a great report from Eric, Rebekah and Emilee this week about a little girl in Zambia named Rhoda, who has Downs Syndrome. When she wandered into the room where the other children were listening to a Bible Story, Rebekah opened her arms wide and Rhoda came happily to her and snuggled in her lap. Later the translator told them that when the other children saw Rhoda come in, they were snickering and making fun of her. But when they saw the team members welcome her with open arms, they grew quiet. Later, they imitated what they saw Rebekah do and tried to serve Rhoda by helping her eat.
- So, what is the lesson Jesus is teaching, here? The child is not held up by Jesus as an example of humility, but as a picture of the little, the insignificant, the least, last and lowest among us. JESUS is the picture of humility, as the Creator of the universe holds this child who is not even named in his arms. Whoever *receives* one of these little ones receives me, Jesus says, and whoever receives me receives the One who sent me. We are called to be like Jesus, the servant of all, to love and to serve others, no matter who they are. It reminds us of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, where the one who served the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick or the imprisoned ones served Christ Himself. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:31-46)

- Feel like you're in a valley? The disciples certainly did. Here's what Jesus told them to do. Go serve someone. Better yet, BE a servant, wherever you are.
- Prayer