

The Way to Greatness
Mark 9:30-40

³⁰ Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it. ³¹ For He taught His disciples and said to them, “The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.” ³² But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him.

³³ Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?” ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. ³⁵ And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.”

³⁸ Now John answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.”

³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ For he who is not against us is on our side.

Introduction: They won't do it when you watching them. You have to look without being noticed. The little girl sings into her hairbrush in front of the mirror. She makes a perfect ten dismount off the coffee table/couch apparatus. The little boy tames the west with his six shooters or masterfully dispatches a host of imaginary assailants with a frantic flurry of karate kicks and chops. They will continue lost in the magic of their imagination unless you should rudely stumble in upon them. Then they will blush and wait until you move along before they submerge themselves back into their dreams of greatness.

These 12 disciples are engaged in such a childlike moment. They are debating among themselves about which of them will be the greatest in Christ Kingdom. Christ was walking in the lead as the Rabbi always did. These behind, were going up and down their ranks claiming the reasons why they should be the first in Christ' kingdom. Peter said, “He called me the rock here.” John said, “Yes but I am related to him as a cousin and I gain the seat nearest him at our meals.” James reminded them that he was the oldest and most experienced. Andrew reminded Peter that it was he who followed Christ first. Etc.

They worked themselves into a passionate debate. Once in a home in Capernaum the Lord turned to them and walked in on their child like debate. “What were you debating about on the road?” They didn't answer. Like kids caught in their imaginative games of greatness they just blushed.

He knew what they were talking about. His question was calculated to bring their words out into his presence in order to convict them and correct them. They had debated on who was to be the greatest. The Lord will now redirect their ambition for greatness by redefining greatness as SERVICE. “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”

Let us look at three elements in our account this morning.

- 1st Let's evaluate the disciples ambition.
- 2nd Let's consider Christ directing of their ambition into service.
- 3rd Let's consider Christ's directions for that service.

I. Let's evaluate the disciples ambition

A. Notice the inappropriateness and selfishness of their ambition.

The Lord Jesus has just announced to them the destination ahead of them. It is a pathway of the cross. His first, theirs to follow. He is now to be betrayed and killed and then rise again. They are perplexed. They are grieved by the thought. But their perplexity and grief is only superficial. They shake off the concerns in a moment. It is not so deep that it would keep them from thinking of themselves. **While the Lord Jesus was walking to the cross they were fighting over and counting up their crowns.**

Ex. He has just recently called them to bear crosses in following him and they are instead arguing and debating and bearing grudges in their attempts to compete and ascend in positions of importance over one another. It reminds me that the sibling rivalries that fired up the activity in the back seat of the car when we were growing up were really about each child fighting over their stake in greatness. The disciples were doing the same thing... And so this desire for greatness finds expressions that are inappropriate and quite selfish.

B. Note as well that there is something appropriate and faith-like in their ambition.

Here are twelve roaming vagabonds arguing over which one will be the greatest in the everlasting Kingdom of their Savior.

Ex. Visited a farm once where the stock yard had been scrapped off and the manure had been mounded up into a great pile. On that pile a number of young boys were having a king of the hill battle.

To the unbelieving eye the sight of this rag tag bunch of Galilean rejects arguing over which would be the greatest in God's Kingdom had to look ironic at best. **Ex.** Of Charlie and I wheel housing our way onto an Aeroflot plane in Krasnodar Russia.

Even with all Christ had said about suffering, rejection, crosses and death. They believed that a kingdom lay ahead of them and that they were destined for greatness. They were not arguing over whether they would all be great. That was a foregone conclusion. They argued over who would be greater. It may have looked silly to the natural eye but it wasn't.

They had faith. They had a hope. Jesus was the Christ. He was going to come into His kingdom. They would all be great. The question was, "*Who would be the greatest?*" They had an unsinkable belief that someday they would reign with Christ.

This is why children make believe of doing great things. Because the future is ahead of them unknown but full of hopeful potential, they know that greatness is waiting up ahead. So to the disciples...the future was ahead of them and so to was greatness!

We need that same hope to fire up in us ambitions of greatness in God's kingdom. People who are struggling in perplexing and grievous circumstances need the hope to dream of future greatness, just as these perplexed disciples were doing.

In **2 Timothy** Paul is writing one of his last letters, if not his last. He is addressing a church pastor-ed by young Timothy that is entering into a season of suffering. Timothy himself is struggling to maintain his leadership at the head of this local church family. Paul says to Timothy and this church in **2 Timothy 2:3** "*endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.*" Timothy has doubts about his effectiveness in ministry. The church is entering into a fresh round of Roman persecution. Paul is writing from Rome. He is imprisoned there under Nero and it is close to the day of his execution. Discouragement, perplexity, grief, all of this was in the air. "endure hardship as a good soldier," Paul writes. Then he gives hope. **2 Timothy 2:11-12** "*This is a faithful saying: for if we be dead with him we shall also live with him! If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him!*" Here is hope, faith, a future worth dreaming about.

I don't think the Lord Jesus resented the dreams of greatness in these disciples. He put the dreams there by his own words. He himself had promised them they would reign with him one day. Joseph was a dreamer too... The future was all in front of him. He had a dream in which he saw the Sun and the Moon representing his father and mother and the stars representing his brothers. His star rose above theirs and these all bowed down to him. Now Joseph wasn't very appropriate. His brothers were already jealous of him because he was favored by his father Jacob. **Inappropriate timing...** Joseph shared his dream with them all and they were angrier still. They said in **Genesis 37:19-20**, *Look, this dreamer is coming!*²⁰ *Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, 'Some wild beast has devoured him.' We shall see what will become of his dreams!*" Inappropriate timing, an insensitive moment to let yourself dream and to state your dreams... YES. But was the dream good? Was it an appropriate faith and hope to be great for God. YES... a thousand times more YES... And his greatness became a salvation to those very brothers.

II. Now Consider Christ directing of their ambition into service

1st see here that Christ doesn't squelch their dreams and their ambitions for greatness. God does not squelch the dreamer who desires to do great things for God and be great before Him. To the contrary God puts the dream in their hearts and he puts out the promise of greatness as an incentive.

God is regularly found extending rewards to his own as an incentive to their actions. Just note here that in **Mark 9:41** he even offers a reward to a person who simply gives another individual '*a cup of cold water.*' In the New Testament the Lord promises his followers who endure in serving Him... A **Crown of rejoicing** and a **Crown of life** (**James 1:12** *Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*) **1 Peter 3:4** God promises to the faithful pastor of God's flock that... *when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.* Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 4:8 that there is waiting for him and for all that look to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ on that day a **crown of righteousness.**

We sing, Crown him with many crowns but did you know he is going to crown us with many crowns! Listen – the impulse of greatness is not a result of the fall. It was put in us by our creator. The distortion of that impulse; putting me first, being on top of everyone else... that is the ruined result of the fall impacting our impulse for greatness.

2nd I want you to notice that Christ does not stifle the impulse for greatness... instead he directs into a lowering of ourselves into service. *You can all be great. But you have to get there by being the least. You make yourself the servant of everyone else.*

Greatness is not being king of the hill. If that is what you want you'll fight for a dung heap. Greatness is getting beneath all others and serving them. What makes this so great... It is great because it is Christ like. It is great because it is god-like. **Jesus** said of his own self, *"That the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give himself a ransom for many."* The Scriptures over and over speak of our service to God. It is the unmistakable command of God that we should serve Him. And yet read scripture and you will see God unmistakably serving us. He feeds us, protects, clothes us, blesses us, raises us from the dust, crowns us with loving kindness, covers us with kisses of mercy all the time saying to us... Serve me... serve me... And then as we turn to serve Him he directs to those object of his own holy, loving service and says, *"Serve them."*

Service is greatness because it is Christ like and God like.

Service is greatness when it is done to others for Christ's and God's own sake and glory.

III. Let's consider Christ's directions for that service.

We will consider more next week but we will start here.

1st How low should you go?

The disciples should be ready to admit now that they have been wrong-headed of sorts. Maybe they will serve each other after all. They after all are the leaders of this movement Christ is founding. *Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them,*³⁷ *"Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."*

That child doesn't represent the new born baby Christian. It doesn't represent the weak and needy in society. That child represents little children. The Lord Jesus is saying, *"Your service must stoop to serve not only yourselves but down to this little child. Serve this child and receive in my name."* The point here is that service must reach low enough. It must go to that individual that you think is beneath your duty. Listen the men of the Lord's day didn't take care of children... It was not their job. The point is made... Serve to the point of doing what seems beneath you.

How low did Christ go to serve us? Our Lord **Philippians 2:7-8** says, *made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.*⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.* John the Baptist said of Jesus, "I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the tie on his sandal." Yet this king, *"Stooped and stoops to wash the sin from my feet and hands."* Go that low... serve...

2nd Don't make a club out of service.

I can't tell you how many clubs and fraternal organizations and man honoring institutions are formed around the notion of serving others. The Shiners, the Knights of Columbus, the Royal order of Water Buffalo... everyone has a service and if you are worthy enough you may get the invite to join their serving group.

The regal robes worn as vestments of ecclesiastical greatness were first worn as humble robes of service but somewhere along the way honor was given to the serving, rewards were prematurely handed out by men who could not wait for the Lord's "Well done thou good and faithful servant." And closed fellowships were formed to impose greatness on a few servants as opposed to those outside the group who weren't serving.

O the pride of man that seeks greatness from being in an exclusive group...even a group of servants. John says, "*Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.*" Note John doesn't say follow you, but follow us...

This is the attitude that exults in our form of service as the measure of our greatness instead of exulting in who we serve. Lord they don't do it like us so we don't want them doing it. But it is not what you do... how you do it... who you do it with... that really matters... It is who you do it for... in whose name all your service is consecrated... and who does it through you that matters. Christ must be all, not the servant, not the service, not the group of servants but the Lord.

Descend into the Greatness of serving others For Christ Sake... Dream Big