

Sermon outline and notes:

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Mark 9:30-50 “True Greatness”

Intro. Shortly after Jesus warned of His upcoming death, His disciples began to argue quietly with one another as to who would be the greatest. Human pride seized on the expectation that the long-awaited Messianic kingdom was immanent. After all, Jesus had promised that some of the disciples were going to see “the kingdom of God come with power” (9:1), & they imagined themselves reigning with Jesus. Who would sit next to Jesus? Who would be the greatest? Of course, Peter, James, and John thought they would be the greatest, for they were chosen to go up on the mountain with Jesus. The other 9 disciples must have been envious, and each thought they should be the greatest. Judas thought *he* should be the greatest. He was the only Judean in the group, & he was the treasurer. Matthew was probably the one who had made the most money. Perhaps he would be the greatest. Andrew was Peter’s brother. He brought Peter & many others to Jesus. Surely he would be the greatest. Nathaniel could have said, “You guys are all crazy. Jesus told me, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!’” (Jn. 1:47).

When they settled down in a house in Capernaum, Jesus asked in v.33, “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?” Jesus already knew the answer, but He asked it that they might begin to reflect on what they had done, and might feel thoroughly ashamed. And sure enough, there was an embarrassing silence. Jesus had been talking about giving Himself to die on the cross for others (v.31), and they had been talking about self-glory.

Now Jesus did not rebuke a desire to be great. In fact, He went on to tell them how they could be truly great. A desire for greatness is certainly normal. Many just watched the Olympics, and everyone who competed had trained & worked hard to win the gold medal. They wanted to be the greatest at their particular sport.

Even children want to be the greatest, but they usually do so by identification with someone else. Did you hear about the boys that were arguing as to whose dad was the greatest? One boy said that his dad could whip the other boy’s dad. That fellow said, “Oh yea, well how do you know?” He replied, “My dad has a list of everyone he can whip, and your dad is number 1 on the list.” The boy went home and reported what his friend had said. His dad got upset and went to that other dad. He told him what his son had said (..whip me... #1 on your list.) Then he said, “Well I’m here to prove to you that you cannot whip me. Now what are you going to do about that?” The other dad replied, “Well, I am just going to take you off my list.”

So we see, a desire for greatness is normal. I hope you want to be great for God. But Jesus points out that there is a right and wrong way to achieve greatness. And we’re going to see that the world’s way & God’s way are often just the opposite. Oh, how our perspective on greatness needs to be changed!

So this morning I want to share with you three ways to achieve true greatness:

I. HAVE A HUMBLE SPIRIT

The world believes that greatness is achieved by bullying & manipulating your way to the top. That is where you can rule & use your position of power to lift yourself up in pride, & accomplish self-centered goals. But Jesus teaches that greatness is achieved by humility. In v.35

Jesus said, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” He says we should be willing to take the last place, the position of lowliness. There are two manifestations of humility here in this text.

A. Be Humble in Your Associations – Jesus uses a visual illustration to get His point across. In v.36 we read, “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...” He tenderly reached out to a little child. Whenever He wanted a child there was always one present. Children loved to be near Jesus. He was not too big or too busy to take interest in a little child. Imagine how lovingly & tenderly Jesus must have taken that child in His arms. Jesus gave this child His time & attention even though the child had no influence or power to do anything for Jesus.

In contrast, how does the world seek greatness? They seek out those who have influence, power, or money, & cater to them, & try to use them. But true greatness is showing an interest in people like this little child. And He is telling His disciples to forget all about rank, pre-eminence, and prominence. Instead, they should give at least as much attention on the least of society, even just one little child. He said in v.37, “Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me...” Those who are great in the eyes of God do not reject children & others who seem insignificant, but we receive them, love them, & care for them. And notice that Jesus said we should receive such a child “in My name” (v.37). That means to treat the child with all the love and consideration which Christ Himself has a right to expect of His followers. So the Son of God declares that the way to greatness lies in devoting ourselves to the care of the weakest and lowest of his flock.

Humility is not only demonstrated by our associations. Humility is also manifest:

B. Be Humble In Your Service - Notice in the last of v.35 that Jesus also said, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be ... servant of all.” The lowly place is that of a servant. The word “servant” is from the word “deacon,” which literally refers to one who waits on tables. It’s not necessarily the person who has the *title* of “Deacon” that is great, but the one who fulfills the *role* of a deacon or servant.

Jesus said in v.41, “For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.” Even just giving water to a thirsty person in the name of Christ is a form of service that qualifies someone for true greatness. But be sure your service is done in the name of Jesus. There are some groups that help people in the name of the U.S. government, or political party. There are other groups that help people in the name of the United Way. There are other groups that help people in the name of a service club. But true greatness is ministry in the name of Jesus Christ, and that ministry will be rewarded for eternity.

Are you more interested in being served, in self-indulgence? Or are you seeking opportunities to serve others. Only in service do we attain true greatness in the eyes of God. So we see that true greatness is achieved through humility. Another way to attain true greatness is this:

II. HAVE A NON-PARTISAN SPIRIT

The world says that greatness is achieved by political partisanship. “We win, you loose” is their motto. And you win by forming political parties, and you demand loyalty to the party.

You have to tow the party line or you're out. I have never seen so much partisanship in Washington in my life. The #1 concern is not what best for the country. The #1 concern has been what's best for me & my political party.

Well, the apostle John was falling into the same mistake, & I'm sure he thought he was doing the right thing. Jesus had just talked about receiving a child, yet in v.38 we see John had not received an outsider who was casting out demons in Jesus name. This man was in all probability a true believer in Jesus. He was doing a good work. He was warring on the same side as the apostles. But he had not yet established a close relationship with the regular followers of Jesus. So John and others tried to stop (cognitive imperfect) him from casting out demons.

Likewise, the church has practiced a similar kind of partisan spirit to this day. Members of all branches of Christ's church are apt to think that no good can be done in the world unless it is done by their own party and denomination. They are like him who cried when Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp, "Moses, my lord, stop them!" (Numbers 11:28).

Religious partisanship or sectarianism has led to all kinds of conflict, and even violence. We see this in the Muslim world, and we even have witnessed it in the Christian community to a lesser degree. Our Baptist forefathers were persecuted because the established church did not allow any disagreement, even for conscience sake. That is why Jesus said in the last of v.50, "have peace with one another."

So notice what Jesus said beginning in v.39, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me." Jesus establishes the basis of fellowship among believers. Notice the repetition of the references to the name of Jesus in vv.37, 38, 39, 41. Now that's the basis of fellowship. If you believe in Jesus, we are in the same family, regardless of your denominational label.

So let us reach out the hand of brotherhood to all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ and build upon the firm foundation of His infallible Word. We are to fellowship & work with other churches that openly confess Jesus as Savior & Lord, regardless of their denominational label. We are not to care which denomination or church is getting the credit. We are to minister in Jesus' name. He is the one who is to get the credit! So we are to guard against an attitude of intolerance, narrow exclusivist, and any kind of sectarian or partisan spirit. Let us beware of the slightest inclination to stop and check others, merely because they do not choose to adopt our plans or work by our side. We may think our fellow Christians mistaken in some points. We may imagine that more would be done for Christ if they would join us, and if everyone worked in the same way. But all this must not prevent us rejoicing if the works of the devil are destroyed and souls are saved. Let us have the spirit of Moses. He did not forbid Eldad and Medad from prophesying. Instead, he said, "I wish that all the LORD'S people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29; cf. also Phil 1:14-18).

Did you realize that such a partisan spirit can exist within a church? There is a natural tendency to form cliques within a church, & if you are not in their clique, you are always on the outside looking in. But those who are great in the kingdom of God have a welcoming attitude toward all, especially those who profess faith in Christ.

Finally, if you want to be great in the eyes of God:

III. PURSUE HOLINESS

Many of the so-called great people of this world are some of the greatest, most immoral sinners. They do anything it takes to get to the top. They will lie, cheat, steal, & even murder.

Yet according to Jesus in vv.42-50, those who are truly great pursue holiness, purity, & righteousness. Hebrews 12:14 says, “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.” You cannot be great in the eyes of God unless you live a holy life. I don’t care if you become the C.E.O. of a major corporation, or the President of the United States. If you are not living a holy life in the eyes of God, you are not great. You are nothing.

So what should we do? We have seen that those who are truly great are considerate of others. Therefore:

A. Pursue Holiness in the Lives of Others - In v.42 Jesus warned against causing “one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble....” He is talking about stumbling into sin. There are always those who would lead Christ’s little ones astray.

Jesus gives a good reason why you should not lead someone astray. He says in the last of v.42, “it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.” The millstone referred to was a big, donkey-drawn millstone that had a big hole in the middle. Jesus says it would be better to die a terrible death than to lead someone, especially a child, into sin.

Parents, do you cause your children to stumble into sin because of a bad example? If your utter profanity, how can you rebuke them if you speak profanity? If your teenage child starts to drink alcohol, & even get drunk at times, what can you say if you drink your booze yourself? Big brother or big sister, are you leading your younger siblings astray. After all, they want to be like you? Watch out! There are dire consequences for leading someone astray, especially a child. Those who are truly great lead others to live right.

B. Deal Decisively with Temptation & Sin - Jesus said in v.43, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off....” Then He said in v.45, “And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off....” Finally, in v.47 He said, “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” He is saying here that sin is a very serious matter to God. The believer must be severe in dealing with any sin that creeps into our life.

Now I believe that Jesus is using a common figure of speech here called hyperbole. A hyperbole is an obvious exaggeration for the purpose of making a strong point. Jesus is not saying that you should literally tear out your eye if you have a problem with lust, for example. He is not saying that you should literally cut off your hand if you have a problem with stealing. He is not saying that you should literally cut off your foot if you have a problem going to bars or other such places. But He is saying that sin is not something we should take lightly. Instead, we should be very severe in dealing with sin in our lives. Sin, being a very destructive force, must not be pampered. It must be “put to death” (Col. 3:5). Temptation should be flung aside immediately and decisively.

Now in the physical realm, most people do not have a problem accepting this. Let’s say you go to a doctor, and he finds some body part that is diseased. Perhaps it has cancer or a bad infection, and if it is not removed, the disease or infection could spread, and kill you. Considering the alternative, you would allow the doctor to perform surgery. Now if we are willing to do that in the physical realm of life, why shouldn’t we be willing to do that in the spiritual realm of life?

So what is Jesus saying to us? If you want to be great, you are to cut out of your life those activities and enticements that may result in sin. Folks, you can’t play around with sin and treat it lightly. If there some amusement in your life that is causing you to sin, get rid of it! Perhaps you

need to go home & cut up some magazines, or destroy some DVDs or CDs. Is there some place that you go that often becomes an occasion for temptation and sin? Then stop going there. Do you have any obscene material? Then burn it! If there is some habit in your life that is sin, then cut it off. Are you watching something you shouldn't watch? Then cut it off. If there something you are reading or looking at that is wrong, cut it out of your life! If the Internet is causing you to sin, get a filter, or get ride of the Internet! Let us walk in Job's steps, who said, "I made a covenant with my eyes" (Job 31:1). Young people, are there certain friends that you hang out with that often lead you into sin? Then cut them off as close friends. Is there a girl friend or boy friend in your life that is leading you into sin? Then break off that relationship. But you say, "Oh, if I do that, I will have to spend some weekends at home." I doubt that you would, but even if you did, that would be better than making a sinful mistake that adversely affects you for the rest of your life. It is better to be alone on a Friday night than be alone for all eternity in outer darkness. Besides, can't you trust God enough to bring someone or something better into your life? Don't settle for the devil's substitute for God's best.

Now Jesus knows that human nature has a strong attraction to sin. So He provides the motivation we should need to pursue holiness. Now I conclude my message with one final point about the pursuit of holiness:

C. Consider the Motives of Holiness – Jesus provides two strong motives for pursuing holiness in the way He has described.

1. Hell Awaits Those Who Pursue Sin – Why is it that people do the right thing? One motivation is to avoid the consequences of sin. Here in this text of Scripture, Jesus warns of some rather serious consequences. In vv.43-44 Jesus said, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.'" Jesus speaks of a place called hell. In fact, He spoke about hell more than anyone else in the New Testament. Hell is so bad that Jesus says it is better for you to loose one of your hands than to go to that place.

Now the word "hell" is translated from the word "Gehenna." Every Jew was familiar with that word. It described a valley to the south of Jerusalem. It had been a place for the worship of the pagan god Moloch. Israel itself fell into the terrible sin of worshipping that false god (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). The image of Moloch had arms extended as if to receive something from the worshipers. Do you know what that something was? People would sacrifice their own children to Moloch. The image would be heated, and when the parents would place their child on the arms of Moloch, the child would be scorched and die. Can you image a parent killing their own child like that? Yet, something similar is going on today. One method of late term abortion uses a saline solution, and that unborn child experiences another type of burning until the child dies inside the womb. Anyway, in that valley, there was a time when people could hear the cries of pain from children dying in the fire in Gehenna.

But when good king Josiah came to the throne, he changed that (2 Kings 23:10). Then he turned that valley into a garbage heap for the city of Jerusalem, which remained unto the day of Jesus. They would burn the garbage, and usually a fire was going at all times in the city dump of Jerusalem. It was a place of foul odor. Worms would eat away at the garbage and dead bodies that were not being burned at the time. So what was Gehenna? It was a place where the foul and impure things of Jerusalem were cast.

You may not want to believe it, but Jesus declared that there is such a place. You see, Gehenna illustrates a truth about God's universe. God is holy, pure, and just, and He must cast out of His presence all that is impure and sinful. God has determined that He will purify His universe of what is sinful and impure. If you choose to hold on to your sin, God will have no choice but to cast you and your sin into hell.

Notice one of the worst things about hell. It is eternal! 3 times Jesus says that it will be a place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." The torment, accordingly, will be both external, the fire; and internal, the worm. This suffering will last for ever and ever.

Now that's the bad news. But I have good news for you. Jesus suffered the judgment of God upon sin on the cross. He suffered hell on the cross. You can trust in Jesus as your Savior, and God can take your sin away because it has been judged already on the cross of Calvary. My humanity hesitates to preach about hell, but I do not hold back, because of its reality, & because God has provided a way of escape.

Oh, dear friend, don't go to hell. Don't choose sin and hell over Jesus and heaven. Repent of your sins. Give up anything that stands between you and the salvation of your soul. If you truly believed what I am saying to you, then you would not leave this building today without knowing for sure that you have been forgiven of your sin. Christian, look at what Jesus says in v.49, "For everyone will be seasoned with fire..."¹ Jesus is saying that if you, as a believer, will use the fire of self-judgment & the Word of God to purify your life, then that will be good for you. If you don't, God will allow fiery trials into your life to purify you. One way or another, "everyone will be seasoned with fire," for God is a holy God.

2. Holiness Is Required for Usefulness - Look at v.50, "Salt is good...." What is it good for? Salt penetrates and burns out the corruption and stops the spread of impurities. It is also good for seasoning. But Jesus goes on to say, "but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it?" When you pursue holiness & purify your life, then there is that salty nature in your life, that you will be a blessing to others, and a witness to others. The pure, dedicated life is an attraction for the cause of Christ. Do you have a salty nature, a life full of truth, love, joy, and peace?

But Jesus warns of a problem here. When Christians let sin get into our lives, we have lost our flavor. We have lost our saltiness. There is spiritual deadness in such a person. There is no zeal for the Lord. You can't be useful to God & others if you are not willing to cleanse sin out of your life.

Are you useful for the Lord? Are people coming to Jesus because of your life and ministry? Are Christians being led closer to the Lord because of your life and ministry? If so, you are great in the kingdom of God. If not, then you are not among God's great servants, and your reward will be small.

Conclusion: Are you pursuing greatness in the eyes of God? Or are you content to living a mediocre Christian life? Well to be great, Jesus has shown us what we must do. We must practice humility in our associations & service. Don't be partisan & sectarian, but loving & receptive. And finally, pursue holiness.

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*

¹ Our older texts leave out the rest of this verse.

(Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from sermon tape of 1/22/84). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).