

Matt Henry  
Mark 9:30-37  
23 Sept 2018

“Redefining Greatness”

God’s grace and peace...

When Jesus told the twelve disciples, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all,” let’s just say that wasn’t the career path the disciples had envisioned for themselves. To them, as to our world, greatness means exceptionalism, being served, having privilege and power. But Jesus tells us greatness is achieved by serving others; that greatness is found in humble service. It’s the complete opposite, but that’s what we have come to expect in the kingdom of God. Jesus is the only one who can serve all. I can’t serve all. You can’t serve all. But Jesus has and does. He is the King who serves his subjects—not just once on the cross—as ultimate as it was. But Jesus is still serving us. He is loving us, providing for us, strengthening us, forgiving us, praying for us, teaching us and leading us. He is the Servant King. That’s the basis for our service. He tells us to serve and shows us what greatness looks like.

So let’s pick this up in Mark 9:30, “They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples.” Jesus doesn’t cater the crowds or popularity—that would be the world’s version of greatness. He is focused on teaching his disciples. “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.” Rather straightforward, but the disciples are not getting it which tells us there’s a difference between teaching and learning.

My son, Tyler, goes to St. Ignatius Catholic School just up the road. And he’s liking that school a lot. After the first day of school, Tyler came home and said, “Those Catholics sure do pray a lot.” They do a great job and the school is new—just in its second year now. I went to a back to school night for parents this week. The principal explained how they have a personalized learning approach. That means that they will put kids in the level they are at based on their skill, not their age. It takes more work to have a customized approach. It’d be a lot easier to just have one size fits all approach for teaching. I know it’s hard to imagine, but just pretend you found yourself in a situation where only one person was speaking and everyone else had to sit there and listen. It’s a stretch I know. Educators say that’s not the most effective teaching method—and yet that’s our default. A learner has to get involved with the teaching in order to accept it and retain it. They have to ask questions, otherwise they don’t learn.

In the instance of Jesus teaching his disciples, there’s nothing wrong with his teaching, there’s nothing wrong with his methodology. The problem is the

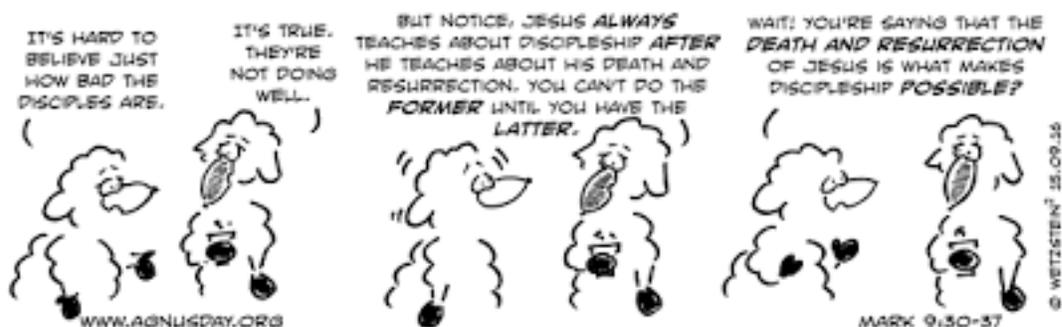
disciples aren't learning. Why not? It's like unbelief—without the Holy Spirit, the light doesn't go on. "They did not understand the saying and they were afraid to ask him." Why were they afraid? No one wants to appear as if they didn't get it.

People always say, "When I get to heaven, I'm going to ask God this question!" Yes, there are some questions we just don't have the answer to this side of eternity. But I think there are more questions that we don't ask not because there isn't an answer, but because we're hesitant to ask the questions. It takes courage to ask. So the way Mark 9 works is that if the disciples aren't going to ask questions, then Jesus will! There's actually something of a teacher's paradigm in Mark 9.

One, Jesus asks a question to initiate a conversation, Two, He presents truth that surprises us and Three, He gives a visual to demonstrate the teaching. This pattern of discipleship is ours to follow!

I gave you a cartoon that's not really funny, but it had a point in the middle frame. "But notice, Jesus always teaches about discipleship after He teaches about his death and resurrection. You can't do the former, until you have the latter." Meaning, unless you understand that Christ will die and rise again to reconcile the world back to God, you won't be able to follow Him. But He speaks in the third person. "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of

men.” Any time Jesus uses Son of Man, it is to refer to His role on behalf of humanity. It’s a broad, universal, sweeping action for all people. Jesus is for humanity even though the humanity rejects Him.



As learners, I bet there are other things that Jesus has taught you that you now cherish and hold dear, but once did not understand at all. He probably had to tell you or show you more than once in order to get it. He did the same with the disciples; three times Jesus predicts his death—Mark 8, Mark 9, Mark 10. The first time Jesus says it, Peter rebukes Jesus. The second time, here, no one says anything because they are gripped in fear. The third time Jesus says it, James and John come along and ask for positions of greatness in glory. The learning is not going to so well.

So Christ has redefined greatness. The world would say only so many people can be great. Not too many. You have those on top of society and the hoi

polloi, the commoners below. Even within the twelve, they were jockeying for position. As they go along the way to Capernaum, they start arguing about who was the greatest. Can't you just hear Peter? I walked on water. Andrew says, "Oh yeah? Well I brought you to Jesus." James and John chime in with their own. The idea is being great means being better than. But with Jesus, everyone can actually be great—not just a few. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Everybody can be great ... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

That's where it comes from. Once our hearts are transformed, then we can put our hands to work and do great things in life for others. We don't put ourselves first anymore. But that still goes against our old nature which rises up every so often. We don't like coming in last.

My wife, Sally, started running cross country in middle school. She was pretty good. Her coach figured out what made her tick. It's not that Sally really wanted to come in first. It's that she didn't want to come in last. That was her fear. So they told her, "Just beat that person." And so she'd hustle and beat that person. And then she would set her sights on the next person. And so she did. She was never last.

That strategy may have worked for cross country. For some people, this is how they live their life! But it's not for us who live under the cross. We are to seek to be last of all, servant of all (v. 35).

Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you discussing along the way?" No one says anything. Peter could have said, "Ummmm, fishing?" Jesus sits down, that's the rabbi position for teaching, and calls the twelve. Rabbinical method. Start with a question. Giving a teaching that surprises. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." He needs a visual. So he calls a child to him, takes him in his arms and says, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me, but him who sent me." Greatness was redefined.

Why a child? What qualities did a child possess in that culture?

- a) Innocence
- b) Precious
- c) Not valued
- d) Kids eat free at IHOP

Is innocence or preciousness the aspect here? NO! That is not Jesus' point. This child is an example of the last and the least. No status, no rights, no power, and

so very needy. Children are dependent on the goodwill of others. Unlike doing favors for other people, they can't give power in return. So how does one "receive" a child in Jesus' name? You pay attention to them. You have a place for them. You honor them—just for who they are, not what you can get in return. Welcoming the least in Jesus' name, is to welcome Jesus. When we welcome Jesus, we're welcoming the Father as the One who sent His Son.

It's not about making a big deal about us; it's about recognizing Jesus is a big deal! Discipleship was a priority for Jesus. Is it a priority for you and me? We show it is when we ask questions, when we engage the teaching. We show that discipleship matters when we serve. We show that our hearts have been transformed by the One who has served us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.