

“Who Is the Greatest?”
Mark 9:30-37
February 23, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark.

We are in the middle section of Mark’s Gospel, in which Jesus sets his sights on Jerusalem.

Three times in this middle section Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. And three times he explains some of the implications of it for his disciples.

We come to the second conversation about that this morning.

With that said, let’s hear from our text: Mark 9:30-37.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{9:30} 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.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, you have dealt well with us,
just as you have promised in your word.
Teach us now good judgment and knowledge,
for we believe in your word to us – your commandments and your testimonies.
You are good and you do good,
teach us your ways.

We know that your word to us in the Scriptures is of more value for us than thousands of pieces of gold and silver.
Help us now to treat it and attend to it as such.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:65, 66, 68, 72]

Introduction

The first part of our text this morning is a direct statement about the suffering that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem, as well as his resurrection. The second part applies what that means for how Jesus's followers should approach life.

As we did last time, we'll focus on the second half of the text – the implications for our own Christian walk. After we come to the third prediction of his suffering, in chapter ten, we'll then consider all three statements about Jesus's death and resurrection together.

But this morning, as we consider not just Jesus's suffering, but it's implications for us, one theme that emerges here is that because greatness is given by Jesus, we must walk in his footprints by faith.

Because greatness is given by Jesus, we must walk in his footprints by faith.

Let's break that statement down and consider it in more detail.

Since Greatness Is Given

The first assumption of this text is that greatness is given.

Foundational to this text and its application for us is that greatness is given, not grasped at.

Greatness is given ... by a person. That's a foundational assumption of this passage.

The problem for us is that most of us approach greatness as if it's something we're supposed to grasp at within an impersonal system.

We tend to act as if greatness is something we get based on our achievements or our attributes – that there's some equation out there, some scorecard, where the things we've done or the gifts and abilities we have will be tallied up, a total determined, and then whoever has the highest score is the greatest.

Whether it's attributes – who is the smartest, who is the strongest, who is the most hard-working, who is the most righteous – or it's accomplishments – who has accrued the most power, or the most prestige, or the most good works, or the most pious religious deeds, or the most career success, or the most put-together family, or the most wealth, or something else – we act like there's some impersonal formula or scorecard that will determine our greatness. It's impersonal. Cold. Objective. A system.

What does that look like for you? What's the formula like in your thinking? What do you try to tally up and compare with other people to see where you rank on some kind of impersonal scoreboard in your mind?

Because that's what the disciples were doing here.

And we know this because of who they had their conversation with. The disciples were discussing which of them was the greatest – which of them would get what rank in Jesus's kingdom, when he took the throne. [Horne, 138-139]

But they're having this debate ... without Jesus.

If Jesus is going to be King ... then, presumably, he would be bestowing positions of honor among his followers. But rather than speak to the personal King about what he will do, they act as if the answer of who goes where can be determined by an impersonal system they could calculate.

They were acting as if greatness was something grasped at in an impersonal system, rather than it being something given by a personal Lord.

It makes me think of a certain type of reality show.

I'm not a reality-tv show person. But as I thought about this text, I found myself thinking of the kind of shows where a higher-up boss, or even a CEO, goes undercover and works one of the low-level jobs in his own company and, in that role, observes his employees.

Now, a lot of revealing things can happen in that kind of set-up – for either the boss or those who work for him.

But one pattern that struck me as I thought about this text is when an employee neglects or mistreats the undercover boss because they're trying to work the system to get ahead themselves.

They want to climb the ladder to greater power and position and prestige. They want greatness. And they're convinced that the way to get there is to grasp it by working the system. Hit certain numbers. Make certain accomplishments. Get your score in some system high enough, and up you move, to a better position.

And I suppose that a lot of jobs can often be that way.

But on these shows, unbeknownst to such an employee, they soon have their boss several levels above them, or even their CEO, undercover, working alongside or even under them. And then, in their attempts to achieve greatness, these ambitious employees, in one way or another, treat the undercover boss like garbage. And they may make the numbers they were hoping for – they might achieve the score they'd hoped for on whatever impersonal metric they were focused on – they may achieve the thing they think will lead to greatness in the big impersonal system. But in the process they've revealed their underhanded ways or their selfish personality to their boss, as they've neglected or betrayed or misused him. And at the end of the show, when the boss's identity is revealed, the ambitious employee is shocked and dismayed. And rather than climbing higher, they are brought low.

Because in a company with human authorities and bosses, ultimately, it's not really an impersonal system that bestows greatness or advancement. It's people. And it's gaining the esteem of those people that will lead to greatness, not working some system or equation.

And the shocking assumption of our text is that that's how the universe works as well.

If the universe were an impersonal place, then maybe greatness would be achieved in some impersonal way.

But the Bible tells us that the universe is intensely personal. It has been made by and is ruled by a personal God. And that personal God has come to the earth in Jesus Christ. And Jesus now rules over the universe. He is the King.

And while fleeting shadows and mirages of worldly greatness may come and go in this life ... when Jesus returns to make the earth new and to raise all who have trusted in him from the dead to live with him forever, he will bestow blessings and honor, power and position on his people.

All who trust in him will be saved. But not all will receive the same level of greatness in eternity.

And it's that second statement that's especially in focus here. Because in God's kingdom, the greatness bestowed on each person for eternity will not be grasped at through some impersonal process ... it will be given by a personal God – a personal King – who will decide who to impart more or less greatness and glory to.

And whatever weird mental games we, or our culture, or our church devise to keep score of who we think is the greatest will have no bearing at all on the King's decisions.

That's what the disciples failed to appreciate here.

That's what we so often fail to appreciate.

Greatness – true greatness – is not grasped at or achieved in some impersonal system or game ... true greatness is given by a personal King.

Greatness is given.

That's the first thing we see here.

By Jesus

But the second thing we see is that greatness is given by Jesus.

If greatness is given by a person, rather than grasped at in an impersonal system, then it matters a whole lot who that person is.

If you'll allow me one more reality TV reference ... when you are doing something that will be judged ... it matters a whole lot who is judging you – who is bestowing victory or defeat on you.

If your judge is Mary Berry, the sweet old woman from the Great British Baking Show ... then you should go about your task of making great food a lot differently than you'd probably go about

it if your judge was Gordon Ramsay, the loud chef who screams obscenities at contestants on the show Hell's Kitchen. Mary and Gordon are looking for very different attributes and character traits in a person they would want to honor and bestow greatness on.

And the Bible tells us that in our lives – in this universe – the person who imparts greatness – who gives honor to people – is Jesus.

Jesus is the One we want to think well of us.

And who is Jesus?

Well, he reminds us in verse 31: He is the One who is willing to suffer the cross and shame, to save others.

He is the One who willingly bore our griefs, and carried our sorrows ... who was pierced for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities, who was willing to go like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, to serve us ... to take on the chastisement that brought us peace, so that by his wounds we might be healed. [Isaiah 53]

He is the one who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. [Mark 10:45]

That's who he is. That's what he's like.

That's the King who will decide who is greatest in his kingdom.

Greatness is given. And it's given, ultimately, by Jesus.

We Must Walk in His Footprints

And so, because greatness is given by Jesus, we must walk in his footprints.

Because greatness is given by Jesus, we must walk in his footprints.

And he makes that clear in verse 35. "If anyone would be first," he says, "he must be last of all and servant of all."

As he'll tell his disciples in the next chapter, Jesus "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." [Mark 10:45] And so, if anyone in Jesus's kingdom would be first, he, too, must be servant of all.

God the Son came and humbled himself, coming as a suffering servant – a servant to all. That's who he is. And if we desire to be great, he calls us to do the same – to walk in his footprints, to make ourselves last of all and servant of all, just as he did.

And to drive that point home, in verse 36 he takes a child, puts him before his disciples, and then says to them: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

In other words, far more than how we stack up to others in worldly achievements, or power, or prestige, Jesus says, when it comes time to bestow greatness, he is far more interested in how we have treated children ... whether we've treated children with the same love that Christ has treated us.

Think about that for a moment.

And as you do, remember that the ancient world did not have the same sentimentalized view of children that the modern world does. Children were not highly regarded in the ancient world. Greek and Jewish society did not extol the virtues of childhood as modern societies often do. [Edwards, 288-289] "Aside from normal family affection children were not rated highly in the ancient world; they had no status or prestige." [Wright, 124] And so, when Jesus points to the importance, in his eyes, of how someone treats children, the point certainly applies to the young ... but it also extends beyond them.

And we see this in Matthew 25. There, when Jesus speaks of what separates his true followers from false followers – what distinguishes those he will exalt to greatness from those he will cast out – he looks at how they treated "the least of these," as a broad category. Specifically, he mentions how they treated the hungry and the poor, the stranger and the foreigner, the sick and the imprisoned – those whom society sees as having little value. And then Jesus essentially says: "As you did or did not care for the least of these my brothers and sisters, so you did or did not show care to me." [Matthew 25].

Jesus is far more concerned with how we treat and how we serve the least of these in this world than he's concerned with the stupid and pathetic worldly, cultural, or pharisaical score cards for success that we invent.

Jesus himself didn't score very high on the worldly, or cultural or pharisaical scorecards of his day ... why on earth do we think that he would care how we score on those things?

Instead, he calls us to walk in his footprints and to make ourselves last of all and servant of all.

Which means that anyone can be great in Christ's kingdom. It doesn't take a special position in the church or a special background or unusual opportunities. But Jesus is saying here that honor and greatness in his kingdom will go to "whoever" among his people cares for the least of these [v.37] – to "anyone" who makes themselves a servant of all [v.35]. [Wright, 124]

It is by accepting Christ by faith – receiving and resting on him as he is offered in the gospel – that we are saved and enter his kingdom.

And once in his kingdom, we don't need a special position or even special skills or abilities or smarts to succeed and receive eternal honor from Christ our King.

All we need to do is imitate our Lord. All we need to do is to make ourselves servants of all, just as he made himself a servant to all. That's what Jesus loves. And when we do that, he is pleased.

To please our Lord, you don't need special skills or special opportunities. You just need to humbly serve those the world sees as having little value, just as the Lord has humbly served you when you had little value.

Because greatness is given by Jesus, we must walk in his footprints. We must make ourselves humble servants of those our society deems of little value – just as he did for us.

By Faith

Finally, this is something we are called to do by faith.

Since greatness is given by Jesus, we must walk in his footprints by faith.

First, it requires faith because we don't see it.

Except for in little sentimental asides or brief moments of clarity, the world doesn't value those who serve the least of these – those who make themselves servants of all.

It values those who grasp at worldly greatness. It values those who claw their way to the top. It values those who excel in ways that force others to serve them. That's what we see held up as greatness around us.

And that's the kind of attitude and approach we often see rewarded in this world. It's the one who grasps and claws and gets others to serve him who so often ends up with the biggest bank account and the most power and the greatest prestige in this world.

But Jesus here is calling us to look not to the immediate outcomes of this world, but to the outcomes he will grant in eternity. This world we can see. Eternity we cannot. And so that, in itself, requires faith.

And because we can't see it, we struggle to believe it even when Jesus says it to us clearly and directly.

In Mark's Gospel, we often marvel at how, when Jesus speaks, his disciples so often fail to hear him, and believe him.

But we have the same problem.

Because here Jesus speaks to us directly as well. And he says: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."

He says: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Elsewhere, after speaking about the hungry and the poor, the stranger and the foreigner, the sick and the imprisoned, Jesus essentially says: "As you did or did not care for the least of these my brothers and sisters, so you did or did not do it to me." [Matthew 25].

As we hear such texts, Sinclair Ferguson challenges us, asking: "If it is still true today that your attitude to those who have no 'standing' in society, reflects your attitude to the Lord Jesus, what kind of disciple are you?" [Ferguson, 149]

"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Do you really believe that?

Because often, when you do serve the least of these, you don't think of it as a high honor. You don't think of it as a special interaction with the King of the universe. You don't think of it as part of the path to greatness.

And if you don't do those things much, then when you are asked to, my guess is that you see such tasks – such mundane tasks of caring for children or the least of these – as beneath you ... as a waste of your time ... as a waste of your skills ... as a waste of your greatness.

And Jesus here says that you've got it exactly upside down. He is saying that what you regard as an annoyance or a distraction is actually the path to greatness in his kingdom, and what you so often regard as more important – as great and worthy pursuits you'd rather give your time to – those things are the distractions, those things should be regarded as the annoyances that are keeping you from greatness in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus tells you this repeatedly in the Bible. But do you believe him?

I don't think we do.

If we believed Jesus about this, then those who do end up serving others – especially the least of these – would feel a lot more encouraged about that work than they often do. If we believed Jesus about this, then those who work with the least of these would be far more esteemed in our congregation than they are. If we did believe Jesus about this, then we'd have waiting lists to volunteer with Sunday School, or the nursery, or VBS ... instead of frequent volunteer shortages.

Now, I know, many of you are very busy. And I know we all have limits – I'm not disputing that. Some of you probably could add more service towards the least of these in your life. Others maybe don't have room right now.

But if that's you ... if you don't have room ... then the issue may not be that you're working too little in life, but that you're working too much at less important things, and then not enough at the most important things. You might need to cut some things from your time to replace them with something else. You might need to reduce the kind of work or labor that the world values ... in order to add the kind of work or labor that Jesus values.

And doing something like that takes faith. It takes trusting Jesus's word over the world's word ... trusting Jesus's word over our gut feelings about what's most important.

Far too often, we don't really believe Jesus about these kinds of things. We might as well admit it because he already knows.

And so our first need might be faith. It might be that prayer we heard last week: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." [Mark 9:24]

We might need to ask Jesus to help us believe that true greatness is given by him – not by the world.

We might need to ask Jesus to help us believe that he really is humble and lowly, and he wants us to be humble and lowly.

We might need to ask Jesus to help us believe that when we lower ourselves and serve others – especially the least of these – he delights in such things, and he delights to crown such acts of humble service now, with greatness in the world to come, in his Kingdom.

We believe these things ... but we need help with our unbelief for each one of them – and so we should pray for greater faith.

And then, we need to act on Jesus's Word, rather than the directives of this world or the instincts of our own hearts.

Which means that, whatever your life looks like, in some way, you need to take real steps to put more value in service to the least of these and put less value in worldly paths to greatness.

And so ... if you're someone whose life is already marked, or even dominated, by service to the least of these, that means you need to stop denigrating the work you do. Jesus doesn't denigrate that work – he says it's a path to greatness, he says it's service to him – how could you then denigrate such a thing? If your life is already marked or even filled by such service, whether to children, or the elderly, or those society looks down on – whether that service takes place in your home or out in the world, either way, then you recognize that though the world around you may turn up its nose at the work you do, Jesus loves it. You need to believe him. And then you need to find your satisfaction in his opinion, rather than the world's. That's what faith calls you to.

For others of you ... if your life has some connections to the least of these ... whether it's your kids or grandkids ... elderly parents or grandparents ... those with additional needs, or financial struggles, or social stigmas ... if you have those connections ... but you find yourself often pushing those obligations away ... trying to avoid them ... trying to keep them from getting in the way of more ambitious pursuits in your life – like your career, or the growth of your bank account, or the prestige of your name, or your role in leadership or something like that – if that's you ... then faith in Jesus's words here calls you to recognize that you have been pursuing greatness in an upside-down fashion. Instead of climbing up towards greatness ... in Jesus's eyes, you have been descending down, away from greatness.

Every time an opportunity calls you to serve one of the least of these in some unglamorous way ... Jesus is pointing you to a path that will lead upwards – that will elevate your soul, that will move you towards true greatness ... and every time you avoid that opportunity or scorn that calling ... you are choosing instead a worldly path that descends away from true greatness in Christ's kingdom.

You desperately need to reorient your view of reality – you need to recalibrate what is a waste of your time and what is the best use of your time on this earth – and you need to act according to Jesus's direction, not this world's. That's what faith means for you.

And finally ... if you're someone ... who through intentional action, or just the passive flow of your life ... has mostly cut yourself off from the least of these ... then for you faith and repentance means recognizing that you have cut yourself off from what Jesus says is the true path to greatness in his Kingdom ... and you need to intentionally begin to turn your life around.

You need to step out of the bubble you have created for yourself and serve those who are the least of these. Maybe it means reaching out to children or the elderly in your extended family, whom you have neglected. Maybe it means reaching out to and connecting with and serving people in need in your community you have avoided or walled yourself off from.

Maybe it means that you need to step out of your comfort zone and volunteer to serve others in a real, concrete way that will force you to care for the least of these – sign up to serve in the nursery, to assist with children’s Sunday school, to help with VBS, to serve at the Tacoma Rescue Mission, to come in on Thursdays and help make sandwiches for the homeless, or to come here on a Monday night to help teach English to some of our neighbors from other countries.

Children, the disabled, the elderly, the poor, the homeless, the foreigner – these are the least of these Jesus calls us to serve. And he called us to serve them not just from a distance, or with a check ... but in the trenches, as servants ourselves.

It can start small, with one little adjustment at a time. But it shouldn’t end with one adjustment – one token act of service from time to time. It should grow. That’s what faith in Jesus’s words here would look like for some of you.

Conclusion

Whatever station of life you may be in ... Jesus here calls us to faith. And that faith should lead to action.

Since greatness is given by Jesus, we must walk in his footprints by faith.

Jesus’s words here are clear to us.

Let us recognize that greatness comes from him.

Let us remember what his footprints looked like.

And let us walk in his ways, by faith, trusting that “if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Let’s Study Mark*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999.
Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
Keller, Timothy. *Jesus the King*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.
Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.