The Servant’s Road To Greatness
Mark 9:33-37

Introduction

The ninth chapter of Mark finds the servant transfigured (vv.1-13); a demon possessed boy restored (vv.14-32) and now Jesus continues His journey towards the cross of Calvary. In broad terms Jesus will address the issues of humility (vv.33-37); harmony (vv.38-41) and hell (vv. 42-50).

We are on a journey with the disciples of Jesus. As we follow Jesus we find ourselves on the road to greatness. But the road to greatness does not look like the well worn highways that lead to worldly success. The road to greatness is found in listening to the Son of God and obeying the will of God. The road to greatness is is marked by service to others. In order to serve we must overcome the desires of pride and position and prominence and cultivate the discipline of humility. The road includes allegiance to Christ and a healthy understanding of the contrary road--marked Hell.

We soon learn that the way up--is the way down.
If you want to be seen, get out of sight.
If you want to be great, forget yourself.

Jesus has bluntly warned the disciples what awaits Him in Jerusalem. Yet the disciples continue to think of Christ’s Kingdom in earthly terms.

The Awkward Tension (v.33-34)

Mark 9:33 (NKJV)  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?”

Jesus and the Disciples arrive at Capernaum. We know Peter kept a home there. Was it one of the other disciples home or a generous benefactor? We are not told.

The word “disputed” translates the Greek verb dialogizomai--it can mean argue or bicker but may well include the idea of reasoning!

34But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest.

Why are the disciples silent? They are ashamed! Jesus is speaking of his impending suffering and death and they are arguing among themselves about position and power. How awkward! The Bible is right when it says the heart of human beings is deceitful and desperately wicked above all things (Jer. 17:9). William Barclay writes; “It is strange how a thing takes its proper place and acquires its true character when it is set in the eyes of Jesus. So long as they thought that Jesus was not listening and that Jesus had not seen, the argument about who should be
greatest seemed fair enough, but when the argument had to be stated in the presence of Jesus it was seen in all its unworthiness” (see p. 222).

How awkward when Jesus walks into the room! The fighting and bickering and arguing ceases and silence settles on the surface of their consciences. We are not told how the dispute started. We are not told what they said. The Lord had spoken of his betrayal, death and resurrection. It may be the conversation started out quite innocent; “Well I don’t know what that means, but I know that come what may--I’m with Jesus. I’ll be by His side.”

Perhaps Peter pointed out his preeminence. Perhaps Matthew suggested the qualities of leadership had more to do with a right head (thinking) than a right heart (feeling). There was good reason both James and John were called the sons of thunder.

Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali upon his conversion to the Nation of Islam.

"There's not a man alive who can whup me.  
I'm too fast. I'm too smart. I'm too pretty.  
I should be a postage stamp. That's the only way I'll ever get licked."

Our churches and our homes would be much happier places if we could learn to control ourselves before we think of controlling others. How are we to think about ambition? Is it a virtue or a vice?

T.S. Eliot wrote; “most of the trouble in the world is caused by people wanting to be important.”

The Bible’s teaching rub’s against the grain of this world’s concept of greatness. The beginning of greatness is to be little, and the increase of greatness is to be less, and the perfection of greatness is to be nothing!

We must remind ourselves of the context. Jesus has been speaking of a cross. But talk of personal greatness, personal recognition, personal prestige, talk of authority or esteem has the net effect of ignoring the cross, or denying the cross, or delaying the cross.

**The Awesome Tenderness (vv.35)**

> 35And 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.”

In the world of ancient instruction--when a Rabbi or teacher wanted to communicate an important truth, the Rabbi would sit down with His followers. I am impressed that Jesus does not scold or offer a harsh rebuke. Jesus knows that we are clay. Jesus knows their motives--even
The Servant’s Road To Greatness
Mark 9:33-37

if their words were unwise. The instruction is repeated elsewhere (Matt. 23:8; Luke 22:24 and later in Mark 10:43). What are the job openings in Christ’s Kingdom? How do you submit your resume? Your status is determined by your willingness to serve!

You will note Jesus does not condemn ambition or leadership (if anyone desires to be first); but ambition must be put in its proper context. Ambition can be either a virtue or a vice. A virtue if it is tempered in the cooling waters of service. A vice if one is willing to exalt self and elevate self at the expense of others.

True selflessness is rare—and when it occurs it is usually remembered. The Greeks tell a story of a Spartan named Paedaretos. Among the citizens 300 men were chosen to govern the cities affairs. Paedaretos was a candidate. When the list was filled and it was announced Paedaretos was not chosen. “I am sorry you were not elected.” A friend offered condolences. “The people ought to know what a wise and just officer you would have made.” “I am glad” said Paedaretos—”that in Sparta there are 300 men better than I am.” Here is a man who becomes a legend because he was prepared to give others first place and bear no ill will.

The disciples are not arguing who will be chief in character or the qualities of spiritual maturity. The disciples are arguing over who will be first in name and position. With name and position comes power, fame, wealth, recognition, prestige, admiration.

Ambition requires instruction. The prophet Jeremiah wrote; “Do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them” (Jeremiah 45:5 NRSV).

Paul writing to the Philippians added; “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3 NRSV).

Jesus invites them to reconsider the definition of true greatness!
Jesus prescribes a massive dose of humility to counteract the selfish ambitions of his disciples.

“If anyone desires to be first (protos), he shall be last (eschatos) of all and servant of all (diakonos)”.

Jesus insists the best way to take first place is to voluntarily take last place and live for others rather than self. Last of all is not the same as servant of all. The one expresses humility and the other ministry.

There are really two paradoxes: the lowest is the highest and the chief is the servant.
The word paradox is interesting. It means incredible, or contrary to opinion or expectation. It came to mean a statement that on the surface seems to contradict but in fact compliments. The way down is the way up! Sinking is rising! We must lose to gain! We must give to obtain! One invites us to look inside. And the other to look outside.
Do you want to be great in God’s Kingdom? This is a kingdom of love—and the distinctions of higher and lower—are in the process of being abolished and service is delight!

The human heart is far more comfortable with the title master. But Jesus puts human ambition and worldly standards of success and then models that ministry in every aspect of life.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you want to find your life?</th>
<th>Lose it.</th>
<th>Matt. 10:39; John 12:25</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you want to lose life?</td>
<td>Find it.</td>
<td>Matt. 10:39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Of being unknown yet well known.</td>
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<td>2 Cor. 6:9</td>
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<td>Of dying, yet possessing life.</td>
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<td>Of dying, yet able to give life.</td>
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<td>John 12:24</td>
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<td>Of being sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.</td>
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<td>2 Cor. 6:10</td>
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<td>Of being poor, yet making many rich.</td>
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<td>Of having nothing, yet possessing all things.</td>
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<td>2 Cor. 6:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of hearing words that cannot be expressed.</td>
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<td>2 Cor. 12:4</td>
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<td>Of being strong when one is weak.</td>
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<td>2 Cor. 12:10</td>
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<td>Of knowing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.</td>
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<td>Eph. 3:19</td>
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<td>Of seeing the unseen.</td>
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<td>2 Cor. 4:18</td>
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The Amazing Truth (vv.36-37)

36Then 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,

Look at the beautiful expression “when He had taken him in His arms”. It is one Greek word; enagkalisamenos---verb used only by Mark (the aorist participle)---“to hold in the crook of the arm”.

Do you understand the living illustration? Jesus is doing something kind! Jesus takes a child and wraps the child in his arms and begins a firm but gentle squeeze. This is an act of affection and kindness! This is an act of kindness perhaps to the least esteemed person in the room!

Who was that child? Do you think he or she ever forgot that moment? The day Jesus swooped up the child and used him or her as a lasting illustration? We are not given the name. Perhaps for good reason. Perhaps we can might put our name here. And invite Jesus to use us as an illustration of the last and the least.

The one ignored or overlooked.

Children have an amazing capacity to read people. They may not be sophisticated in the nuances of the world; but they have a keen sense of being able to tell if you care. A child wonders if you notice them, care about them, love them.
The Servant’s Road To Greatness
Mark 9:33-37

The text doesn’t tell us if Jesus spoke to the child. What is the child? Least and the child is content. The child has small hands and small feet. The child can only travel a small distance alone and can only serve with small hands. The child becomes the example of humility and then becomes the object of tender mercy! Not all children are small. Some children are large. Some children are rude and selfish and self-serving. How are we to become that child (the one in the illustration)? Practice humility. Think small. Remind yourself of how little you know. Remind yourself that sometimes you need Adult supervision. Never feel so strong that you don’t require someone else’s strength. Never be so arrogant that you cease to be loved!

In the late 1960’s Dr. Kent M. Keith published his list of paradoxical commands for Christians:

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.
Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

And get Aflac’s dental plan.

Jesus invites us to answer the question—who among us is greatest? The one who gives loving attention to Christ’s little ones; the one who shows kindness and favor to those who are vulnerable and dependent.

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.”
The word “receives” is listed four times in the text. Receive is the opposite of reject.

What is it that Jesus is trying to say? An act of kindness demonstrated in His name; was the same as if the kindness was demonstrated to Jesus Himself. Even more. The kindness is extended to God the Father. Position, rank and authority in the Kingdom of Jesus are not based on pride but a willingness to serve; and a willingness to accept others in the circumstance you find them!

A Salvation Army Officer once said; “Gentlemen, remember that each time you place a hand on a child’s head, you touch a mother’s heart.”

When Jesus uses the expression “in My name”--he is describing motive of self-less service. Pause for a moment and think! This is not simple human kindness or benevolence or social service. Jesus invites the believer to recognize that ministry to others is a recognition of His identity, and mission and destiny. We are invited to recognize Christ’s commands and Christ’s promises and Christ’s ministry as the basis of service. Unselfish service--in His name--opens the door and the heart for more of Jesus and more of God--and brings the doer the blessing of fuller insight, closer communion, and a more complete assimilation to His Lord.

What makes true greatness in God’s Kingdom? It is the ability to bring Jesus into the circumstance. No wonder Paul says, “For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:5-6).

Humility and self-less service are acts of love to express our affection to the Lord Jesus Christ and our Father in Heaven. The teachings of Jesus expose our carnal hearts and reveal just how committed we are to selfish indulgence.

Conclusion

Matthew Henry wrote; “Nothing can make a man truly great but being truly good and partaking of God’s holiness.”

When we look at the life of Jesus and the ministry of Jesus the paradox becomes even more profound.

Jesus hungers--yet feeds the multitudes. Matt. 4:2; John 6
Jesus thirsts--yet is Himself the Water of Life. John 19:28; 4:14
Jesus grows weary--yet bid us come and offers us rest. John 4:6; Matt. 11:29-30
Jesus pays tribute and taxes--yet He is the King of kings. Matt.17:27; Rev. 19:16
Jesus prays--yet hears our prayers. Mark 14:32-42 John 14:13-14
Jesus weeps--yet dries our tears. John 11:35; Rev.21:4
Jesus is sold for 30 pieces of silver--yet redeems the world by His own blood. Matt.26:15
The Servant’s Road To Greatness
Mark 9:33-37

Jesus is led as a sheep to the slaughter--yet His is the Good Shepherd.  
Isa. 53:7

Jesus is put to death--yet raises from the dead.  
John 5:25; 19:33

What happens in a home where people seek last place?  What happens in a community or a 
country where the ambition of leaders is to serve their fellow citizens and refuse prestige?

The divisions and disputes that tear families apart, and churches apart and countries apart would 
ever occur--when the supreme goal is the glory of God and the Majesty of Christ and the 
advancement of the gospel and harmony in God’s Kingdom.

Greatness must be seen in light of redemption. 
The humble will be exalted.  Those who are full of themselves have no room for God.
We lose our life to find it.  Selfishness hinders our ability to give ourselves and our resources to 
others.  We die to self to live for Christ and others.  Slavery leads to freedom!  Paul writes that 
those who “have been freed from sin become slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:18; 1 
Corinthians 7:22).

The foolish are wise.  “If any one among you think that he is wise in this age, let him become 
foolish that he may become wise” (1 Corinthians 3:18). 
It may seem foolish to risk everything on the claims of Christ.

The poor are rich. 
The weak are strong. 
We give to receive. 
We see the invisible.  We rest with a yoke.  We are made great--when we are made small.

How do we serve?  Someone led you to Christ.  Return the favor. 
Be hospitable.  Be kind.  Offer service.  Invite people to church.  Offer a Bible.  Invite people to 
study the Bible with you.  Open your home in the name of Jesus.  Hone your skills in 
evangelism.  Serve others in edification.  Build someone else up.  Serve others in benevolence. 
Has anyone ever showed you kindness?  “Be kind to one another” (Eph. 4:43).

We wouldn’t worry so much about what other people thought of us if we knew how seldom they 
did!

The beginning of greatness is to be little. 
The increase of greatness is to be less, 
and the perfection of greatness is to be nothing.