

July 15, 2012 by Steve Brandon



Great In the Kingdom

Mark 9:30-37

- 1. Understand the Mission of the Messiah (verses 30-32)**
- 2. Serve the Lowest of the Low (verses 33-35).**
- 3. Receive the Children of the Church (verses 36-37)**

In our exposition of the gospel of Mark, we come this morning to Mark 9, verse 30. We will look at verses 30-37. Please consider them carefully.

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 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." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 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." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

As we go through these verses, I think that the best place to begin this morning is by looking at verses 33-34. They really are the core to help us to understand what's happening in these verses. Jesus had just told of what is going to happen to Him. He is going to be killed and rise three days later (verse 31). And then, following these words, Jesus' disciples got into an argument. They were arguing about which one of them was the greatest! (verse 33). In many ways, it shows that they failed to understand what Jesus had just said.

And following their argument, Jesus put forth several statements relating to the argument that His disciples had. The greatest is "servant of all" (verse 35). The greatest receives lowly children (verse 37). My message this morning is entitled, "Great in the kingdom." I believe that this is the core of our text.

We see the disciples (in verses 33 and 34) arguing about who was the greatest. We can put a few pieces together and think about how this argument may have gone down. Peter and James and John may well have begun the discussion, claiming two instances of how they were the favored ones of Jesus.

First, do you remember when Jairus came to Jesus and asked that Jesus come and heal his daughter? Jesus came, and along the way, they received news that "Your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?" (Mark 5:35). Yet, Jesus continued on to the house. At the outside of the house, Jesus instructed the nine disciples to remain behind, as only Peter and James and John were able to accompany him into the house (Mark 5:37). And of all the disciples, they were the only ones privileged to see Jesus raise this little girl from the dead (Mark 9:41-42).

Second, do you remember when the transfiguration took place? When the glory of Jesus began to shine through His skin? (Mark 9:2-3). It wasn't all of the 12 disciples that were privileged to see Jesus in this state. No, it was only the three -- Peter, James and John. And I think that each of these men could well have argued that they were the greatest in the kingdom. They were the privileged few!

Certainly, Peter and James and John were arguing that they were the greatest of the disciples. And yet, Peter could have chimed in and claimed that he was higher than all! After all, he was the one who first identified Jesus as the Christ (Mark 8:29). He and his brother Andrew were Jesus' first disciples (Mark 1:16-17). Peter was there from the beginning.

Furthermore, Peter was usually the spokesman for the group. He was the only one with the boldness to speak against Jesus (8:32). He was the one who said on the Mount of Transfiguration, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (9:5). He is the one who will say to Jesus, "Behold, we have left everything and followed you" (10:28). Peter even lifted himself above the rest. "Even though all may fall away, yet I will not" (14:29). "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" (14:31).

Peter could well have argued prominence! And yet, James and John wouldn't be thwarted. In chapter 10, we will read of how they came to Jesus and requested the best seats in the kingdom: one on the right of Jesus and the other on the left (Mark 10:36-37).

So, the debate of the greatest one was far from settled even after Jesus gives them several illustrations about how to be great. On one level, this comes from their pride. On another level, this comes from the culture of spirituality in their day. In their day, it was super important to be the greatest one spiritually. People in the culture looked up to such people.

During the days of Jesus, it was the Pharisees and the Sadducees who were known to be the most spiritual of people. These were the ones who used to sound a trumpet before them, to attract attention as to how much they were giving to the poor (Matt. 6:2-4). These were the ones who would stand tall in the synagogues and on the street corners and bleat out long and ornate prayers to be seen and heard by all (Matt. 6:5-7). These were the ones who would make their faces gloomy so that everyone would know that they were fasting (Matt. 6:16-18). These were the ones who sought for the places of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues (Matt. 23:6). These were the ones who demanded respectful greetings in the market places (Matt. 23:7). These were the ones who loved being called, "Rabbi" and "Teacher" and "Father" (Matt. 23:8-9).

These people set the standard of spirituality. If you wanted to be great, then you sought to be like them!

It's the same today. If you want to be a great basketball player, then you seek to be like Mike! If you want to be a great football player, then you seek to be like Peyton. If you want to be a great golfer, then you seek to be like Michelson. Likewise in the spiritual realm in the days of Jesus. If you want to be great in the kingdom, then be like the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The problem is that the Pharisees had it all wrong! See, it's not the proud and the boastful and the arrogant and the gifted who are great in the kingdom. The Bible clearly says that the humble and the lowly and the servants are the ones who are greatest in the kingdom. God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34). God looks to the one who is humble and contrite of spirit (Isaiah 66:1-2). This is what Jesus says beginning in verses 33, where Jesus puts forth the path to true greatness.

Now, if you look at the text closely, you can see that the disciples had been around Jesus enough to know that they were wrong in their conversation. When Jesus asked, them, "What were you discussing on the way?" (verse 33), "they kept silent." Guilt and conviction of sin are wrapped up in these words. They knew that such a discussion was shameful. They knew that such a discussion was inappropriate. So, "they kept silent."

Before we get to my first point, I do want to note that many have read these verses and have assumed that it is wrong to seek greatness in the kingdom. But, when you think about it for a bit, I think that you will see that such an attitude is wrong. It is fine to seek greatness in the kingdom. In fact, I would argue that you should seek greatness in the kingdom. Jesus nowhere prohibits such a quest. In fact, in other places, Jesus encourages you to seek greatness in the kingdom. "Don't store up for yourselves treasures here on earth, where moth and rust destroy, where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal" (Matt. 6:19-20). In other words, use your life to increase your eternal wealth!

Jesus encourages us to seek a heavenly reward. Use the talents that God gives and create more, and receive your reward. "Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents" (Matt. 25:20). His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21). Use your talents for eternity.

Jesus encourages sacrifices here and now for greater reward then: "In the regeneration when the Son of man will sit on His glorious throne, ... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:28-29). But, notice the path to greatness. It isn't greatness here and now. It is greatness in the life to come.

When Jesus speaks about being great, He speaks of future greatness -- treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19-20), greater responsibility in heaven (Matt. 25), reward in heaven (Matt. 19:28-29). So, seeking to be great isn't condemned by Jesus. It's merely that it looks different than we often think greatness to be. Thus, the title of my message, "Great in the Kingdom." Or, you might say it this way, "How to be great in the kingdom."

True greatness comes not along the path of being the pre-eminent leader. Rather, true greatness comes through the path of humility and service.

Edith Schaeffer was once asked, "Who is the greatest Christian woman alive today?" She said, "We don't know her name. She is dying of cancer somewhere in a hospital in India." [\[1\]](#) Edith Schaeffer is describing the life of someone who has spent a life of sacrificial service without fanfare, without recognition, without prominence. This woman has lived a life of moment by moment dependence upon the Lord, because she hasn't had the resources around her to help herself. And now, in her dying days, she's continuing to serve by pouring out prayers of faith for the saint. Yet, through all these difficulties, she was a servant of all. That is true greatness.

This morning, I have three points. Let's start in verse 30. Do you want to be great in the kingdom?

1. Understand the Mission of the Messiah (verses 30-32)

This is where all greatness begins -- with the example of our Lord. We read in verse 30, ...

Mark 9:30-32

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 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." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

Once again, we find Jesus telling His disciples what is going to take place in the near future. His ministry is coming to an end, because Jesus is going to be killed. And the hope of the gospel is that He will rise three days later. But, we find that His disciples "did not understand the saying" (verse 32). They didn't understand the mission of the Messiah.

See, when Jesus came to earth, He didn't come to establish an earthly kingdom! No, He came to die for our sins upon the cross, taking the punishment that we deserved! His reign would come after His death, when He ascended to heaven to sit down at the right hand of His Father. Right now, He is waiting for all of His enemies to be placed as a footstool under his feet. But, someday, His reign will be fully established.

It is because the disciples didn't understand these things that they had their discussion about who is the greatest. This is the core of where it started. If they had understood Jesus' words, they wouldn't have argued as they did. And they had no excuse. Notice how this is the third time that Jesus told this to His disciples. The first time came back in chapter 8, right after Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29).

Mark 8:31

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Jesus said the same thing while coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration in Mark 9:9, "As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead." And then, in our text, verse 31, ...

Mark 9:31

... 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.

In chapter 10, we will see Jesus saying the same thing again. We see Him in 10:33-34 saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles. They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again."

In each of these statements, Jesus fills in different pieces to the puzzle. In chapter 8 and 10, Jesus speaks about who is going to inflict suffering upon Him: the elders and chief priests and the scribes. In chapter 10, Jesus spoke of where His death would take place: in Jerusalem. In chapter 10, Jesus speaks of the details of His suffering: mocked and spit upon and scourged. After the transfiguration, Jesus mentions His death briefly, focusing mostly upon the resurrection.

But, in all of them, the thrust is very much the same -- suffering, death, rising from the dead. Over and over and over again, Jesus repeated these things. Suffering, dying, rising from the dead. And the disciples should have known what was going to happen.

But, alas, they didn't. Verse 32 says, "But they did not understand the saying,". And what compounded the problem is that they "were afraid to ask Him" (verse 32). In 8:17, we see that they had already felt the sting when Jesus asked them, "Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart?"

Now, it's not that it was too hard to understand, as in upper level mathematics. Rather, it's that the mission of the Messiah wasn't in their paradigm. They were thinking of a lofty and exalted Messiah. They were thinking of a political ruler who would come in power and might.

But, such wasn't the plan of Christ. He was coming as a suffering servant. He was coming in humility. He was modeling the path to greatness for us. We read in Philippians 2, ...

Phil 2:5-11

Christ Jesus, ... existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The path to greatness is the path of humility. The path to greatness is letting God exalt you. It's that path that Jesus took. It's that path that we, as his followers are called to mimic.

Philippians 2:4 tells us, "Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus." This is what a follower of Christ seeks. We seek the lowly walk. We seek the path of suffering for the sake of righteousness. We seek the path of humility.

Ephesians 4:1-3

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace

The life of the follower of Christ will walk in the same way that our Messiah walked.

Do you understand the mission of the Messiah? Do you understand that true greatness follows in His path? Have you embraced the gospel for yourself? Have you embraced the humility that it requires?

Let's turn to my second point. Do you want to be great in the kingdom?

2. Serve the Lowest of the Low (verses 33-35).

This is what we see in verse 35, ...

Mark 9:35

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."

Jesus here calls for a huddle. He calls for a family meeting. He sits down and calls the twelve to Himself. And He teaches them this one simple truth: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (verse 35).

This is not the way of the religious leaders. This is not the way the disciples thought. This is not the way that our world thinks. Yet, it is the way in God's kingdom.

Do you want to be first? Do you want to be the greatest? Then be the last of all. Be the servant of all.

Now, the good news is that we all can do this. We all can be servants.

My father's 77th birthday was this past Friday. We had a family gathering to celebrate it. One of my nephews had a T-shirt with a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I thought that it was so good that I took a picture of his shirt. It reads, "Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve." I think Dr. Martin Luther King had read Mark 10:35. He understood that the path to greatness was the path of servant hood. And since all of us can serve, all of us can be great!

The issue isn't so much, "Can I be great in the kingdom." Rather, the issue is, "Am I willing to be great in the kingdom, which means that I am a servant now."

Notice how I worded my point: Serve the Lowest of the Low (verses 33-35). That comes right from verse 35. Notice how Jesus said, you need to be last of all and servant of all. Notice the repetition of the word, "all." "Last of all." "Servant of all." There is none beneath your standard. You are willing and ready and eager to serve everyone.

This means that you need to serve the children. This means that you need to serve the poor. This means that you need to serve the foreigner. This means that you need to serve the minority. This means that you need to serve the disabled. This means that you need to serve the mentally handicapped. This means that you need to serve the guy that always gets on your nerves. This means that you need to serve the gal who always speaks only about herself. This means that you need to serve the one who is hurting. This means that you need to serve the sick. This means that you need to serve the helpless. This means that you need to serve the shut ins at the nursing home. This means that you need to serve the unlovable.

How are you doing?

Lest you get smug in your own self righteousness, I want to bring to your attention something that took place a few weeks ago here at Rock Valley Bible Church. I was here preaching. And somewhere about halfway through my sermon, two guys walked into the service. They slid into one of the rows in the back -- I'm guessing about 4-5 rows from the back. They were on my right -- your left. They wore shorts and T-shirts, obviously not too ready for a church service. The best guess that I can come up with is that their car broke down, and they needed some help. Perhaps they ran out of gas and were looking for a fill-up. At least that's what it looked like to me. Maybe there was some other explanation. I don't know. But my guess is consistent with the look and feel of these two gentlemen.

Anyway, they came into the service and began listening to what I was saying. I watched them grab a Bible from the pew and attempt to follow along with what I was saying. I could tell that they weren't too comfortable being here. I could tell that they weren't too interested in what I was saying. After about 5-7 minutes, they got up and left. And here's the stunning thing. Nobody moved a muscle.

Now, I don't know who saw them come in, so, I'm not trying to place the blame upon anyone. If anyone, the blame comes upon me, because I saw them and didn't say anything. I considered stopping my sermon and calling out to them, to see if we could help in any way. But, I'm saying this -- these guys were "the lowest of the low." They were coming into an obviously uncomfortable situation for them. They obviously were in need of some type of help. Why else would they come into the church? And nobody even attempted to engage them in conversation to find out if we could help them or not.

Oh, church family, we can improve upon this. I need to think about what to do if this takes place again. You say, "I don't know what to say." You say, "I'm a woman. I'm not going to speak with two rougher-looking guys." Try this, "Hello. Do you need any help? I can't help you right now, but the service will be over in about 30 minutes. I bet that one of the guys at church can help you." And if they leave after you tell them such things, that's fine. If they only want help on their terms, we can't help them. But, let us at least offer them help.

I tell you that story not to shame you. I tell you that story not to point the finger at those who saw these men. Surely, in my mind, there are reasons why those who saw these men let them come and leave. But, I tell you this to help jolt your thinking. We can just be snug in thinking that all is OK with us. But, all is NOT OK. We have areas of improvement if we want to be great in the kingdom.

It means serving the low. It means serving the downcast and the needy.

Let's go to my last point, Do you want to be great in the kingdom?

3. Receive the Children of the Church (verses 36-37)

Verse 36, ...

Mark 9:36-37

And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

This may well have been Peter's child. After all, they were back in Capernaum -- back in "the house." The only house we know of in Capernaum is Peter's house (Mark 1:29). The only of the disciples that we know was married was Peter (Mark 1:30). But, that's all conjecture. All we know is that Jesus took this child into His arms and said some astounding words, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives me" (verse 37).

Our culture is a bit different than when Jesus said this. For the most part, our society is a very child-friendly society. Our property taxes go to support the education of children, everywhere. Our government has a policy, "No child left behind," in an effort to give every child in America an opportunity for success. Our government has labor laws to protect little children from spending their young years in a factory someplace.

Our children have an abundance of opportunity to be involved in all types of activities: Children can play baseball or soccer or football. Children can learn karate or ballet or gymnastics. Children can learn any musical instrument or sing in a choir. I have had many conversations with parents who are overwhelmed with the number of activities that involve their children. Churches often focus much of their efforts upon children, as they know that a good children's program will attract people to come to their church.

We gladly offer opportunities for children. And when someone preys upon little children, our society is irate. Witness Penn State University.

Praise be to God that children in America are a priority. Praise be to God that there are many who will come to their defense! Now, we aren't perfect. The abortion industry is certainly a blight upon these things. But, overall, our culture is very pro-child.

But things were a bit different in the times of Jesus. Children were to be seen and not heard. In chapter 10, we will see the disciples attempt to discourage those who would bring children to Jesus for him to lay hands on them and pray (Mark 10:13). But, when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14).

Rather than looking down upon such children, Jesus told His disciples to receive them, welcome them, and embrace them. As Jesus looked with favor upon children, He elevated their importance in the minds of His disciples. He said, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives me" (verse 37). In other words, the way in which you treat these children is the way that you treat Jesus, Himself. If you receive these children, you are receiving Jesus. If you reject these children, you are rejecting Jesus. If you harm these children, you are harming Jesus. If you love these children, you are loving Jesus.

There is an interconnectedness between Jesus and these children. Jesus not only cares for these children, but He also is concerned for how you treat them. In fact, the way in which you treat them is a very real expression of how you are treating Jesus, Himself.

God has a heart for those who are helpless, who are in great need, and who can't help themselves. God hates it when the helpless in this life are exploited. God loves it when we care for them, nourish them, and cherish them. Jesus said that when you receive children in His name, which is in the name of Christian love, you are receiving Jesus.

You ought not to back away from this connectedness. It is very real. The prophet Zechariah encouraged the people of Israel, who were in danger of being plundered by foreign nations. Zechariah 2:8, "Thus says the LORD, ... "He who touches you, touches the apple of my eye" (Zechariah 2:8). If you harm God's people, you harm God, Himself.

Perhaps you will recall when Paul was on the road to Damascus to persecute other Christians. "Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'" To persecute the church is to persecute Jesus. To receive one of these little children is to receive Jesus.

In Matthew 25, Jesus gives us a glimpse of the judgment scene. In that day, Jesus will look upon how you treated those who were helpless: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. He will consider your treatment of them to be your treatment of Him! Listen to His words, "Truly, I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (Matt. 25:40). The way in which you treat those who are helpless is the way in which you treat Jesus Christ, Himself.

And that's the same spirit of verse 37, "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me." There is a huge and obvious application here. I'm thinking of the nursery. I'm thinking of the Children's Church.

We don't know how big this child was. From every indication we have of the text, it seems as if the child is very small. Jesus took the child "in His arms" (verse 36). This may have been a very small child, young enough to hold in his arms. It may have been a child only a year or two old. Or, it may have been a child that was a bit older. I still hold my five year-old in my arms. And he attends Children's Church.

The important thing here isn't the age. The important thing here is the care for children.

I just want to encourage those of you who serve in the nursery or in Children's church. First of all, you are doing a great work. Not just a good

work -- a great work! Jesus looks very highly upon your work. Second, I encourage you to view every single one of these children as Jesus Christ, Himself. And as you care for them, and as you teach them, and as you pray for them; it is just as if you are caring for Jesus Christ.

So, please know that your ministry among the children is connected to Jesus Christ. I appreciate your labor, which often goes unnoticed. I appreciate Nancy, who oversees the nursery. I appreciate Toby, who oversees the Children's Church. These women are true servants among us.

And perhaps, this morning, the Lord is urging you toward greatness as well. Perhaps the Lord is urging you to sign up for a Sunday in the nursery or in the Children's Church. So, talk to Nancy. Talk to Toby. Receive the Children of the Church, and, in a very real way, serve Jesus. "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me" (verse 37).

But, Jesus continues on with the connection. It's not merely a connection between children and Himself. He says, "... and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me" (verse 37). Here, we see the connection between Jesus and God, the Father. Of course, we have seen this connection already in the gospel of Mark. At the baptism of Jesus, the voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased" (Mark 1:11). At the transfiguration of Jesus, the voice came from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him" (Mark 9:7).

God, the Father, has sent His Son to the earth. God has spoken "long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, [but now] in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Jesus is: the heir of all things, the creator of the world, the radiance of the glory of God, the exact representation of the nature of God, the sustainer of the universe, the one who purifies us through His death, the one who sits at the right hand of God, the Father (Hebrews 1:2-3).

And receiving Jesus is receiving the Father. Have you received Jesus? Have you trusted in Him? You will show it in your humility.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 15, 2012 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] As quoted by Paul Miller in *A Praying Life*, p. 56