

## **“WHO IS THE GREATEST?”**

**Rev. Robert T. Woodyard**

**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Scripture Texts: Mark 9:33-37**

### **Introduction.**

After a break for Advent we are returning to Mark's Gospel this morning. I usually take time in January to cover other topics of great importance but I want to get to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem by Palm Sunday so I need to start right back in Mark so we can make it to Jerusalem on time.

Let me remind you where we are in Mark. After a couple of years of ministry in the region of Galilee, Jesus was getting ready to set His face toward Jerusalem. After the transfiguration we have five stories that expose several remaining serious deficiencies in the disciples, stories that expose their complete lack of understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus. Lessons we all need to learn, of course.

The first story was as Jesus came down from the mountain and found the rest of the disciples perplexed because they couldn't cast a demon out of a little boy for which Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith and their prayerlessness.

### **Mark 9:33-37**

This brings us to our text this morning which follows another brief prediction by Jesus of the nature of His suffering, rejection, death and resurrection.

The time of Jesus' suffering was approaching. He was spending more private time with the disciples doing more intentional teaching. Jesus has twice told them about His coming humiliation and suffering, about when He will submit to the humiliation of being crucified and killed.

Somewhere along the way they had time to talk among themselves and they got into a foolish discussion of who was more important, who was greater than whom? We aren't told but would it surprise us if maybe Peter, James and John were in the middle of it with their extra special vision on the Mount of Transfiguration?

They thought it was a private conversation but Jesus drags the whole ugly affair out into the light. "What were you talking about back there on the road?" They are embarrassed and ashamed, no one wants to answer.

Can you imagine having Jesus suddenly appear in the midst of some of our conversations and ask, "What are you talking about?"

Can you imagine our shameful silence, that embarrassing awkwardness to knowing we have been caught saying something foolish, proud, or self-promoting? How many ridiculously foolish words do you wish you could take back?

## **Who is greatest?**

How could a group of grown men who have been with Jesus this long, get into a childish debate about their relative importance to each other?

On top of that how could a bunch of poor Galilean fishermen and tax collectors get into an argument about superiority and greatness? They had given up everything to follow Jesus and certainly given up any possible reputation by being associated with Jesus, yet they are wrestling for places of prominence.

They couldn't cast out a demon from a little boy. They couldn't understand what Jesus was trying to tell them about His death and resurrection. But they still find reason to boast and brag and play one-upmanship.

We may think of ourselves as no big deal, we are just simple, small town folks here in Lynden, well off the beaten path, nothing fancy or famous about us. Yet pride and self-seeking and ambition fill our hearts with vain notions of importance.

Of all our sins, this may be the one that we have to watch out for the most. It rears its ugly head again and again.

Pride is the sin that made the devil the devil. Pride is the sin the devil used to bring down the human race. "Eat this and you will be like God." Pride is the sin that bedevils all our actions and thoughts.

The disciples may not have been much in the world's eyes, but they could still look at each other and compare themselves to each other and wrestle over who had the best case for being in a place of honor and prominence in the Lord's kingdom.

And this just after Jesus tells them how the Son of Man will suffer and die for them.

How do they move from a stark, frank, brutally honest picture of suffering and self-sacrifice and death and dying, to a conversation about how important they are? How can they be so blind, so self-centered?

What a jarring juxtaposition. Jesus' humility and their arrogance. How do you go so quickly from the sublime to the ridiculous?

The Holy Spirit records this to remind us of how deeply ingrained pride is in all our hearts. Pride is the commonest of all sins. Pride is the deepest and the last to be rooted out. We all think more highly of ourselves than we ought, and we think more about ourselves than we do about others.

It's the most soul destroying sin because it above all sin prevents us from repenting, from humbling ourselves before God and each other. It above all sins keeps us from Christ.

If we want to try to cut the disciples a little slack, a crucified Messiah is a very strange idea and really hard to wrap your head around. It's a very alien concept.

***But mark this well.*** A person who loves Jesus and but doesn't like His methods or His ways is a person who is going to have a lot of confusion and a lot of trouble in life. Remember Peter's rebuke of Jesus?

Jesus' ways on earth and Jesus' ways with us are not our ways. We often have a lot of why questions in life, and we find out that Jesus' answers aren't ones we like. Jesus often is not out to fix or change our circumstances, He's out to change our hearts. That's a completely different mission.

**If you desire to be first, be last.**

A mission so radical it turns the world upside down. The world's ways are not God's ways.

The world's view of greatness is power, rule, authority. The world seeks honor and recognition. Christ's view of greatness is serving.

Who is willing to go last? Who is willing to serve? Who is willing to give? Who is willing to show kindness, to show mercy, to give forgiveness? Who is willing to build someone else up? Who is willing to show that Christ and Christianity are world changing realities?

In God's kingdom the greatest thing is giving. After the manner in which God gives, we are to give. And no one lives out giving more than a servant.

Christmas highlights the gifts of service among us and in our families. As we celebrated a wedding and Christmas and the holidays in our house I was especially aware of how the women in our extended family, of which there are precious few, did so much serving. They cooked and baked and planned and prepared and served and cleaned and bought and wrapped and stayed up late and got up early and spent themselves for the sake of everyone else. They held it together and made it happen and too often with not a lot of appreciation or thanks.

Where do we look for examples of greatness in our world? Those who are gifted, successful, famous, privileged. Greatness to God is not found there. It's found in far humbler settings among the more common and mundane tasks. So many of our wives and mothers are examples of selfless servants among us.

Service to others is one of the greatest ways we imitate Jesus and His mission among us. Where can we show our willingness to stoop down, to bend low?

**A little child.**

We live in a child-demeaning, child-belittling culture, a world that looks down on children. For definitions of greatness we never think of children.

Jesus turns the world upside down again and says what the world calls least He calls great, what the world pushes aside He welcomes and receives.

Jesus doesn't say pursuing greatness is bad, He says the way we usually do it is bad.

When we want to be known as great or when we strive to be greater than others and push or promote ourselves ahead of others, that's the sin of pride. When we seek admiration or praise or honor or recognition the pursuit of greatness has become tainted by sin.

Jesus says, "You want to see greatness, let me show you greatness. You want to argue about who or what is most important, let me show you. You want to be first, let me show you how to be first. You want to be great, let me show you how to be great."

The path to greatness is not up but down. Greatness will be found in lowliness, in service, in giving, in receiving a little, insignificant child.

### **Application and conclusion.**

Could this debate happen here? Is there any posturing or positioning between dairy farmers and who has the bigger herd or bigger production? Is there subtle pride in comparison of trucks or homes or kids or business success? Comparing Christian school and public school?

Are we better because we are the First church? Is there any sense of superiority between elders and deacons or between third term officers and rookies or between who does what around here? Are some people's opinions regarded more highly than others? Do we care who gets credit or recognition?

Should I get more respect around here because I am a pastor or because I have a master's degree?

Let me give a personal illustration of a kind of pride that is common among us. I received two calls this past week from people in our community asking me to speak. My first reaction was to say no. Why? I could say because I am busy, but really I think there are others who could do better and being in front of people sets me up for criticism or comparison. What will others think or say? That's a kind of pride, a fear of what others might say or think.

Our growth in maturity and unity as a church depends on our humility, on our dying to ourselves, dying to what others think, and looking out for the interests of others. Selfish or prideful ambition kills our fellowship with God and our fellowship with each other, and prideful fear kills our opportunities to be used by God and serve others.

Of all of God's created creatures on this planet, none has so little right to be proud as man, for none has sinned so greatly as man. And of all men on earth, none ought to be so humble as the Christians, for they know their sin and how much grace they have received.

**James 4:6** "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

**James 4:10** Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

If you are proud, you have God as your opposition.

If you are humble, you have God as your strongest ally.

The mark of conversion, the mark of being a Christ-follower is humility. Without humility there is no repentance and without repentance there is no heaven.

The humble see themselves as they really are before God, not as they are in comparison to others. They see their need for grace, not their need for honor or respect.

***What do we have that we have not received?*** Really, honestly, what do you have that you have earned or deserved? What do you have that you have not received?

A beating heart? Your next breath? Your mental health? Your life on this earth? Your abilities? A spouse? Children? A job? Your salvation?

What do you have that you can claim all the credit for? What do you have that couldn't be gone in a second?

**James 1:16** Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father ... 18 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth.

Life is gift, life is total grace. What do you want to boast about, what do you want to strut around about? Life is be one long lesson in humility.

Humility is freeing, it lets you let go and trust God. It lets you be happy for others success and achievements even if they are greater than yours. We can leave the operation of the universe and the events of our lives in God's hands.

**I Peter 5:6-7** Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

Let me suggest several ways we can humble ourselves:

Begin by meditating on the infinite greatness of God.

Then by reflecting on our countless sins against God.

Consider how fragile and frail your life is and how little control you have over your life.

Contemplate where you would be right now without God's grace and mercy and forgiveness.

Dare to pray and ask the Holy Spirit where pride has taken root in your heart.

Be honest about how dispensable you are. The cemeteries of this world are filled with people thought to be indispensable.

Lay aside thinking too highly of ourselves and think more highly of others and esteem others better than ourselves and be ready to take the lowest place of service.

Do you notice the person who serves you? Are you aware of the lowest person in your world?

Do you notice and greet and thank the cleaning people at hospitals and care centers and hotels?

I am reminded of a college professor who put as the last question on a test: "What is the name of the person who cleans your dorm bathroom?" It was a real question worth real points.

Take an interest in others, ask questions.

Serve others. Who can we serve, help, show some kindness?

Whose happiness can you promote, who can you build up or lift up?

Where can you touch and help the least, the lowest, the lonely, the unloved?

The one job in this church that should be the easiest to fill is that of being a nursery volunteer at least once or twice a year. Nursery work in the name of Jesus is the greatest work in the church.

For those who do acts of service, who give and give and give some more, who spend themselves for the sake of others; for those who serve their families or children or orphans or widows or who take in strangers, to you hear this stunning word of encouragement from our Lord:

**Mark 9:37** “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

**Matthew 25:40** “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

Whatever you do to a child, you do to Jesus and what you do to Jesus you do to God. In other words, the smallest acts of service and kindness set off a chain reaction that shakes the heavens.

The king sees you and knows what you do and takes notice. He is well pleased and your reward will be great.

Whatever the world may say or think doesn't matter, the first will be last and the last first. The proud will be humbled and the humble will be exalted.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who humbled Himself and came to earth and came as a child and went to the cross for us. Nothing should humble us more than what our sinless Savior did for us sinners.

### **Prayer:**

Holy, righteous and sovereign God, we humble ourselves before you and acknowledge we enjoy too much the vain honor and recognition and praise we receive from men and esteem ourselves too highly in our own eyes. We compare ourselves to others and become proud or bitter. By your Holy Spirit rebuke us and expose our soul destroying pride. In our sin show us how vulnerable and weak we are. In our sin humble us by our powerlessness in the face of temptation and how easily deceived and drawn in we are. Remind us of our frailty that we might turn to you for power and strength against sin and Satan.

We are sinners who have sinned against the greatest person in the universe. We are lower than the lowest creature for they have not sinned against your holiness. Humble our hearts that we might be exalted by you and by the glory of your grace. Deepen our love for you and our desire to serve you in our service of others. Keep us clinging to our humble Savior whom you have exalted to the highest place in heaven. And grant in your grace that we will so live in this life that we might have eternal life with Him in heaven. Amen.