



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Greatest (Mark 9:30-37)

SEPTEMBER 4, 2013

Paul Meinsen / PO Box 891, Jefferson City, MO 65102 / paul.meinsen@capitolcom.org

Interim Bible Study Schedule

Wednesdays at 12 noon in HHR #6.

Everyone still working in the capitol is welcome.

Just bring your lunch and join us.

When I hear “the Greatest” two things pop into my mind:

#1 Cassius Clay yelling into the TV camera “I must be the greatest” after he defeated Sonny Liston in 1964.

#2 In the movie “The Natural”, the goal of Roy Hobbs was that when he walked down the street, he wanted people to say “There goes Roy Hobbs. The best there ever was.”

A few years ago, ESPN ran a special on the 100 greatest North American athletes of the 20th Century: 1. Michael Jordan 2. Babe Ruth 3. Muhammad Ali 4. Jim Brown 5. Wayne Gretzky. And at the end of the last millennium, it was quite popular to make a categories “greatest” list—like Gutenberg’s printing press being the greatest invention.

At the end of Mark 9, the disciples are having a similar discussion concerning who among them was the greatest.

This passage is just past the pinnacle of the gospel of Mark. Peter had made the “great confession” that “Jesus is the Christ” (Mark 8:29). The majestic glory of Jesus was revealed upon the mountain as He was transfigured (9:1-13). And upon their arrival from the mountain, Jesus cast out a demon that the disciples could not (9:14-29).

At this point, Jesus was about six months away from His looming death and resurrection. Once again, He reminded His disciples of what lies ahead.

Mark 9:30-32 From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. ³¹For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later.” ³²But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

The first time Jesus brought this “gloom and doom” prediction, Peter rebuked Him for saying such things (Mark 8:31-33). This brought a strong rebuke in return: “Get behind me, Satan...” was Jesus’ reply. It is no wonder then that the disciples dared not bring up their misunderstanding.

What led to the disciples not understanding Jesus’ comments about His death and resurrection? As stated in earlier studies, Jesus’ words did not fit their preconceived notions about the role and work of their Messiah. They could not fathom the fact that their Messiah would be rejected—He was the one who was going to restore Israel and take them out from under the rule of others. Their Messiah was going to be a great king who will make Israel a great kingdom.

But they misunderstood. And like the rest of the crowds that continued to press around Jesus, they were also caught up in “kingdom fever”. They had seen His great miracles. They had even heard his admission that He was the Christ and now, some of them had seen His majestic glory revealed. Therefore, in their minds, the kingdom was about to be restored.

And thus, they begin to have an unholy (and rather ridiculous in light of all that Jesus did and taught) discussion of who among them is the greatest.

Mark 9:33-37 They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” ³⁴But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. ³⁵Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷“Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.”

The problem is not so much WHO is the greatest, but rather HOW greatness is measured. According to Jesus, greatness is not found in one’s qualifications, but in one’s attitude and service to those of lowest circumstances.

CAPITOL COMMISSION INTERIM BIBLE STUDIES

WEDNESDAYS @ 12NOON, HEARING ROOM #6

TRUMAN BUILDING: THURSDAYS @ 7AM, 4THFLOOR CAFETERIA

PROCLAIMING THE GREATNESS AND GLORY OF GOD IN THE MISSOURI STATE CAPITOL

Missouri

The Greatest (Mark 9:30-37)

GREATNESS IS NOT FOUND IN BEING QUALIFIED (9:33-34)

Jesus' reply and the exposed "who is the greatest" discussion tells us that the disciples were probably comparing resumes to see who should be number one. Maybe Peter, for he seems to be the most outspoken and gave the right answer of "You are the Christ." Maybe Andrew, who was one of the first to follow Jesus? Possibly Judas, who was the group's treasurer (John 12:6). They may have been comparing miracle stories and conversions when they were sent out (Mark 6:7-13). They may not have been for themselves but promoting their guy—politics can be found everywhere.

Regardless of their reasoning, the discussion was totally out of place. But it could have been prompted by several things. They could have been caught up in "kingdom fever" as Dr. Robert Thomas puts it. In light of all that has been mentioned previously, the disciples could have felt that the kingdom was coming soon; and they were jockeying for position. They could have been looking at their current journey into Jerusalem. And thinking that Jesus could die there, they may wondered would be next in line to carry on.

A little later, the same topic rose again when James and John, through their mother (Matthew 20:20), asked Jesus to be allowed to sit on his left and his right (Mark 10:35ff).

In the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, status and rank were very important. But Jesus condemned it in His scathing comments toward the Pharisees (Matthew 23:6-7). He also warned His disciples with a parable:

Luke 14:7-11 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts

himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Ultimately, it was not just "kingdom fever" or simply products of the culture, but it was their own hearts that desired this prominence.

Thus the question: Is it wrong to desire to be the greatest? Is it wrong to be first? In this context, what they were discussing and why, the answer is YES!! In light of what they have seen and experienced, and in light of the nature of the Kingdom of God, it was an absurd discussion. Comparing resumes and qualifications to see who is the greatest in a kingdom, in which all those who enter, enter in spite of their resume and qualifications is ludicrous.

And in light of the same entrance into the Kingdom of God, the question is still absurd for God's people today. One enters the kingdom due to God's sovereign grace, and not by any accomplished work.

"THE PREEMINENT STATUS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS CHARACTERIZED BY THE TWIN ELEMENTS OF LOWLINESS AND SERVICE." --R. T. FRANCE

But, as will seen in the next verse, Jesus doesn't condemn the human desire to be great. Instead, He redefines the qualifications for being great. Greatness is not found in being qualified; greatness is found in being a servant.

GREATNESS IS FOUND IN BEING A SERVANT (9:35)

Mark informs the reader that Jesus sat down (9:35). This is not just a detail from an eyewitness, but also a sign of seriousness. This indicates deliberate teaching or formal instruction. Jesus also "called" the twelve to gather around—an urgent call to listen to what He was about to say.

When they gather, He does not directly reprimand their desire to be first. He does not condemn those who are motivated to be great in the kingdom. He simply redefines "greatness". "If you want to be first, that is fine; then be last. If you want to be great, that is great; then be a servant."

Missouri

The Greatest (Mark 9:30-37)

The first and last statement has to do with rank, position and relation with one another. The Apostle Paul reflects this teaching when he wrote “regard one another as more important than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3b). In other words, if you want to be great, consider others as greater than you.

“Servant” comes from the word *diakonos*. It is used throughout the New Testament as one who waits on tables (John 2:5, 9), to human authorities (Romans 13:1-4), and a title for a church leader (1 Timothy 3), It is used here as a servant of a master (Mark 10:43, Matthew 20:26; 23:11, 2 Corinthians 11:14). The term also carries a “special quality of indicating very personally the service rendered to another;” a strong emphasis on serving with love.¹

COMPARING RESUMES AND QUALIFICATIONS TO SEE WHO IS THE GREATEST IN A KINGDOM, IN WHICH ALL THOSE WHO ENTER ENTER IN SPITE OF THEIR RESUME AND QUALIFICATIONS, IS LUDICROUS.

While Jesus turns importance in the kingdom upside down, please note that He is not talking about gaining entrance into the kingdom. He is talking about people who are already in. One may look at this and say humility and good works towards others will get me in. But that would be wrong. ENTRANCE into the kingdom is still by God’s grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Once a person is in God’s kingdom, he or she gains status by becoming the lowest of servants. “The preeminent status in the kingdom of God is characterized by the twin elements of lowliness and service.”²

Philippians 2:3-7 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

Paul’s exhortation in Philippians was the total opposite of the Greek mindset of the day which saw humility, meekness, servanthood as low-class, weak and undesirable. But it wasn’t just the Greek mindset that had to be

changed, the Jewish thought had to be challenged, as well. The Jews of Jesus’ day did not mind the idea of serving another, as long as that person was of substance. They thought that to be of service to a great person would be an honor, to be of service to the janitor—well, that something different.

Thus, it would be easy to see the disciples saying, “I can serve you, the King—no problem”. But to stop that thought, Jesus grabbed an object lesson running by to add a qualifier to His discussion.

GREATNESS IS FOUND IN BEING A SERVANT OF THE LOWEST (9:36-37)

The object lesson that Jesus picked up was a child. Children did not have much of a status in the days of Christ. Like today, though, they were under the authority and care of others; not having the right of self-authority. But due to the hard conditions, sentimentality toward children was very low. While there was a natural attachment to a child, they were not the center of a parent’s universe. They were a great illustration of the “last” of society.

The Greek adjective broadens the scope beyond children to all in a society that are like children in their “littleness” and “unimportance.” To these, whom culture deems as “low”, Jesus called His followers to serve.

He then used a different term as He grabbed His squirming illustration. Jesus took the child in His arms and stated that whoever receives one like this child in my name is actually receiving Christ, and in turn receiving God who sent Him.

To “receive” has a number of potential understandings. It could have the idea to receive like a gift, letter, payment or even a burden. It could mean that one understands someone else’s words. It seems best to understand that Jesus is talking about “hospitality”—the friendly reception which implies care and supplying needs.

This is very similar to the biblical understanding of *agape* love. This is the type of love that followers of Christ are to exhibit (Matthew 5:44; John 15:12, 13, 17—just to list a few). It is a love that makes a conscious decision to take care of the needs of another. *Agape* love is a distinct love which is seen in the giver’s deliberate choice to care for the welfare of the recipient; regardless of the recipient’s worthiness or willingness to receive it.

Missouri

The Greatest (Mark 9:30-37)

And this receiving is to be done in His name. A disciple of Christ seeks to glorify his or her Lord; therefore, all acts of service are done for His name's sake. A person could do benevolent acts for one's own pride and ego. Jesus' followers serve in His name, in His way and for His glory and honor.

And think of this, friend: Who exactly has Jesus been serving up to this statement? It was the lowest of society that He ministered to—He touched the outcast lepers, reached out to those oppressed by demons, served the poor, talked to women in public, and even allowed the little children to come to Him. While this may have been Jesus' first direct teaching on this subject of servanthood, He had been modeling it for almost three years in His public ministry.

As stated earlier, it would be easy for the disciples to say “I can serve you, Jesus our King.” And possibly for them to serve each other. But Jesus said to serve the little guys. And if you serve the little guys, you are serving me; and in turn you are actually serving God. In other words, Jesus said, “if you want to serve God, then serve the littlest of society.”

This was radical in the face of what the disciples saw in the Jewish religious leaders of the day who looked down upon the “lower class” and did nothing but lay extra burdens of religious rules and expectations upon these people. They believed they were serving God by their rigid “rule-keeping”. They did not serve the lowly; thus, they missed on serving the highly exalted God.

James 1:27 This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Again, it must be stated again, Jesus is addressing those already in the kingdom. These are not qualifications to enter—that is taken up in the

¹ Hermann W. Beyer “*diakonos*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 81.

parallel scenario in Matthew 18:3 where Jesus said “unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” The implication here is that once you are in the kingdom, you become great by being the lowest and serving the lowest.

CONCLUSION

For many of you, this is nothing new to you. We have heard this before, but it seems we need this exhortation regularly.

I look at the disciples of Jesus. When He said this, He was about six months from the cross. In just a few days or weeks, James and John were asking to sit in the seats of honor when the kingdom was established (Mark 10:32-45). On the very night before the crucifixion, they were still discussing who was the greatest among them (Luke 22:24-27). The message did not sink in.

I look at my own heart and I see my own desires for greatness. Therefore, I need to be reminded of the greatness that Jesus taught and lived out.

While the desire to be great and first is not always a bad motivation, as believers, the desire needs proper direction. It is not found in doing “big” things for God, it is found in humble service to the “lowest” of people.

Let the followers of Christ follow His lead in being a servant to those that others look and pass over.

Through Jesus Christ, the glorious son of God who came not to be served but to serve, God can forgive your sins, are you interested?

² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 374.