

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

Mark 9: 33-37; 10: 35-45

Themes: The greatest in God's kingdom may seem the least in the world's eyes. Following Jesus is not about glory, fame, fortune, status, prestige, or worldly power. Following Jesus is not about following the lead of the world, but prayerfully following the way of humility and sacrifice and putting the kingdom of God first in your life.

Thoughts to consider:

1. Many societies are based on competition. Everyone wants to beat the other person. They want to be number one. Also, people are constantly finding ways to emphasize their strengths, ignore their weaknesses and put others down to make themselves feel better or to "get the job." The kingdom of God is not about competition, it is about service, humility, exalting God, seeking first his kingdom, and seeking to please God more than others around you. It is about pushing others up instead of tearing them down. Is there a good side to competition? What is most important -- to win or to care about the weak and hurting?

2. Jesus turns things upside down and says to his disciples, *"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all"* (Mark 9: 35). Instead of promoting ourselves we need to be patient and let God take care of this. James says, *"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up"* (James 4: 10). Instead of constantly trying to find ways to lift ourselves up we need to look for ways to humble ourselves. The way of the world is to lift ourselves up, make ourselves look good, and to push others down and make them look bad. The way of Jesus is to lift others up, encourage them, and help them be all that God intends for them to be.

3. What does the child that Jesus took in his arms represent (Mark 9: 36-37)? He represents the weak, helpless, poor, despised, worthless, oppressed, the untouchables, and the people we sometimes pass by and laugh at. When we receive these kinds of people we are also receiving Jesus and God. Mother Teresa said about the despised ones, *"Each one of them is Jesus in disguise."* Jesus said it like this, *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me"* (Matthew 25: 40). To do this, it takes humility and kingdom eyes. God calls us to think bigger than ourselves, our prejudices, our prideful attitudes, our seeking to be recognized in wrong ways, and our self promotion. If this is all we are thinking about, we will overlook the weak and despised ones because we will be too busy seeking out the important people and seeking to follow the way we feel will benefit us most.

4. We are often like James and John (Mark 10: 35-37). We want Jesus or God to do for us what we want. But often we don't know what we are really asking for. As I look back on my life I am very happy that God did not give me everything I asked for. He knows what is best for us. So, we need to change what we ask for. Our main prayer should be, *"Lord, I want to want what you want for me and what is best for my life. I want what is best for the fulfillment of your mission in the world. Lord, change my wants so that I want your will in my life more than I want anything else no matter what I have to go through."* What do you want from God? What do you want out of Christianity? Be sure you are seeking what is best not just what will promote you, keep you safe, or give you status.

5. When Jesus asked them if they could drink *"the cup"* he would drink he was referring to his suffering. Also, when he spoke of his *"baptism"* he was referring to his baptism of suffering. His disciples wanted to be with him in glory, but they did not understand that this included incredible suffering. They said they could drink the cup and be baptized with the same baptism but they did not understand what this meant. It is easy to say you can do something without knowing how difficult it will really be. You may say I want to be a follower of Jesus. But do you really understand how difficult this may be? Are you willing to follow him

even if this means losing a job, being made fun of, losing social status in your society, or being persecuted in other ways? Then Jesus tells them that they will suffer, but that it is not his right to give them places in the kingdom. Some things you cannot earn or get by force. They can only be given to you. If God chooses to raise you up in a certain way, this is fine, but if you try to force things, you may wind up being among the last for, *"The first shall be last and the last shall be first."* Instead of the disciples saying, *"We can,"* drink the cup and be baptized with the baptism that Jesus would be baptized with they should have said, *"All we know is that we believe in you and want to follow you. We don't even know what this fully means yet, but by God's grace and strength we will be able to go through anything that comes our way. Jesus we love you. Please show us your way and give us strength to follow it day by day."* (See Mark 10: 36-40)

6. Why do you think the other disciples were angry with James and John? Maybe it was because they wanted these places of honor themselves. I don't think they were so innocent that they were just thinking about how inappropriate this was for James and John to be thinking that there were places of honor to be had. They too were thinking that Jesus would conquer their enemies and set up his kingdom on this earth in glory. They were thinking ahead and wanted to get in on the fame, fortune, glory, prestige, and power. Have you ever been angry at someone because they got ahead of you and received something that you felt you should have received? If you are following the way of Jesus, you will not be worrying about things like this. You will trust God to give you what is best in his time. Seek first God's kingdom and don't always be running after money and places of honor. Sometimes what is highly valued among men is detestable to God. Luke tells us about the Pharisees who loved money in Luke 16: 14-15 and Jesus' response to them, *"The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, 'You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.'"*

7. The kingdom of God and the church should not operate in the same hierarchical and domineering manner as the kingdoms or companies of the world. In the way of the world those people who are high up will not usually do the work of those who are lower. They each have their role and place. But in the kingdom of God even the greatest will stoop down and do the work of the lowliest servant. Jesus gave us a perfect example of this when he did the work of a servant and washed his disciples dirty feet (John 13: 1-17). Jesus himself who was the great Son of God came also to serve. He even came to give his life as a *"ransom for many"* (Mark 10: 42-45). He came to ransom or save us from the slavery of sin. He bought us back from bondage with his blood on the cross. We are called to serve the world and be willing to stoop down and do the work of the lowliest person. Mother Teresa and her helpers would go out in the streets of Calcutta and gather up the dying and care for them when no one else cared. No one else even wanted to touch them. Remember that Jesus also touched the leper and healed him when no one else wanted to even get close to lepers (Mark 1: 40-42).

So who is the greatest? The greatest one is the one who:

1. Humbly admits that he or she has sinned and is a sinner.
2. Humbly believes in God and that Jesus is their Lord and Savior and that he died and was raised from the dead.
4. Humbly changes their mind, turns around and follows Jesus.
5. Is willing to submit to water baptism so they can receive forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit.
6. Humbly follows Jesus, trusting him to strengthen them to go forward and endure any trial by his grace.
7. Humbly seeks first God's kingdom rather than promoting themselves. He or she does not seek fame, fortune, or glory.
8. Accepts others as precious people in God's sight who need to be loved and cared for no matter how despised they are by the world.