

## Mark 9:30-37

<sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know this, <sup>31</sup>because he was teaching his disciples. He told them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise.”

<sup>32</sup>But they did not understand the statement and were afraid to ask him about it.

<sup>33</sup>They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” <sup>34</sup>But they remained silent, because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all.” <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me.”

## The Greatest

### I.

Long since, all the important information on the topic had been assembled into one compelling work. Scholars poured over every word in that compilation very carefully. There was documented evidence of predictions and the fact that those predictions had come true.

There were also predictions about things that were yet to be. The scholars were products of their own time and their own culture. They put the similar information about the past into the context of the present situation and drew some natural conclusions. Logic suggested that their conclusions were correct.

People like logical conclusions. When all the information can be neatly pigeonholed into your own world view, what could be better? What could be more desirable?

People who do not think of themselves as experts on a subject will ordinarily defer to the scholars who have studied the matter thoroughly. This, too, is logical. Those who have devoted their whole professional lives to a subject can be thought to have a much deeper understanding than those who have only dabbled.

For their entire lives this particular group of men had heard the scholarship of the day. It was pretty much accepted as fact. Who could argue with such brilliant conclusions?

Messiah would come. That was inarguable. Indications from the past implied that God always relieved his people from their political oppressors. Rome was the oppressor. Messiah would overthrow the Roman empire and Israel would be established as the predominant country of the world.

This group of men was convinced they had met the Messiah. In fact, they walked with him every day. They were his followers; disciples, they were called. They were positioned perfectly to play prominent roles in the Messianic Kingdom that all the scholars had determined to be inevitably coming.

“They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know this, <sup>31</sup>because he was teaching his disciples” (Mark 9:30-31, EHV). It was exciting to be taught by the preeminent scholar. He was the Greatest of all the scholars, of that they were convinced.

“He told them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise’” (Mark 9:31, EHV). The Great One said he was going to be subjected to humiliating treatment. He indicated that it would go even farther than that—the Great One would ultimately be killed by those who took him into custody. That simply didn’t comport with the narrative they had carefully constructed from the scholarship of the day

and the conclusions they, themselves, had drawn from their journeys with the Master up to this point.

“But they did not understand the statement and were afraid to ask him about it” (Mark 9:32, EHV). I have noticed that often people don’t ask questions because they don’t want to hear the answer.

“On the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” (Mark 9:34, EHV). Maybe *this* explains why they didn’t ask Jesus—why they were afraid to ask him what he meant. Maybe they didn’t *want* to understand. By not asking the question they could go on in their delusional thinking and keep on believing the desired narrative.

Jesus *was* the promised Messiah. Of that they were convinced. The prevailing scholarship indicated that Messiah would set up a new kingdom and throw out the Roman government. *They*—the 12 disciples—the closest of Jesus’ followers—were perfectly positioned on the ground floor to occupy the most important positions in Jesus’ cabinet.

Can you see the group as they walked along and passed through Galilee? Individuals might have rotated from the front where they were talking with Jesus back to the rest of the group where the heated discussion went on for the entire trip. They thought they were discreetly jockeying for position in the upcoming government.

“They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’” (Mark 9:33, EHV). They hadn’t really been all that discreet. Jesus had caught them in the act. They had been arguing about their own future positions. Secretary of war, perhaps; secretary of the treasury; secretary of commerce. Each one might have come up with a position he was uniquely suited to fill. The argument, however, went beyond just which position suited whom; it also included the discussion about which cabinet position in the new government would be the highest and most important. Which one of the twelve was the greatest?

Perhaps you can make some inferences about modern life. We still do the same thing. People jockey for position in secular life as well as in the church. We still tend to define ourselves by favorably picking out our own best qualities and measuring others against our biased ideas about ourselves, and concluding that we are the greatest.

## II.

“Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all’” (Mark 9:35, EHV). All the scholarship of the Messiah and his upcoming kingdom had been based on logic. That scholarship had been drilled endlessly into all these men before Jesus nominated them into positions among the Twelve—the inner circle of disciples. *This* was not logic.

If you want to be the first in the class to get a drink of water at the fountain, you don’t get out of line and go to the back. It makes no sense. If you want to be the captain of the team you don’t go stand shyly in the corner. It doesn’t work.

“Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me” (Mark 9:36-37, EHV).

Have you ever noticed how politicians treat children? They are just props to be used to bolster the image of the politician. A nice pat on the back or on the head and the child can be dismissed. Seldom are politicians actually interested in the child.

Jesus picked up a child and held him. There was an example to be had, but the child wasn’t just a prop. Jesus’ implication was clear: a truly great one would just as gladly serve a child as to be considered the leader of a group of men.

Typically we measure greatness by how much service the person considered great *receives*. True greatness is found in how the great one serves others. Serving a child doesn’t leave room for

pride. True greatness is to be found in humility.

### III.

Perhaps as they listened to his example the disciples thought back to what Jesus had told them as he was trying to teach them as they walked along toward Capernaum. “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise” (Mark 9:31, EHV).

If the true measure of greatness is being a servant, Jesus is surely the Greatest. His disciples were already convinced that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah. His miracles and his teachings had already given evidence of the fact. Jesus was shown by all these things to be the Son of God.

But his true greatness was soon to be revealed. Jesus—Greatest of all that they already knew him to be—would be betrayed into the hands of men. Among the Twelve stood the one who would do the betraying. Jesus’ true greatness would be shown as he was beaten and abused by the hands that arrested him. His true greatness would be shown by his submission to the evil schemes the men plotted. His true greatness would be revealed in his death at their hands.

Jesus’ death would be slow and painful. As he hung there on the cross, people would see him as the last in line of all people. But being last in line would merely show how Jesus was the Servant of all. His life was offered as a ransom for sins—for the whole world, and for you, personally. Your pride of measuring yourself against others was among all the sins Jesus paid for there on the cross.

Can one really say Jesus’ suffering and death at the hands of sinful human beings was a display of greatness? Absolutely! Jesus—the humble Servant of all—would rise again from the grave on the third day. He still reigns eternally as the Servant-King.

### IV.

The scholars back in the disciples’ day had poured over the Old Testament and had reached their logical, cultural conclusions: there would be a Messianic Kingdom. They were right about that—at least to a point. There was, and is, a Messianic Kingdom. Their conclusion was that it would be a political kingdom. That part was wrong.

Jesus established his Kingdom through his service to you. By dying for sin, he set you free from sin. No one, not even Satan himself, can accuse you before God of any sin. Jesus paid for every single one of them.

Jesus set you free *for* something.

“If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all...<sup>37</sup>Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me” (Mark 9:35, 37, EHV). Now that you have been set free, you are truly free to serve.

Jesus has purged you of pride. There are many things that need leadership in a Christian congregation. The best leadership is servant leadership. Find ways to lead by serving.

Be the last of all and the servant of all. In your role as an under-servant to Jesus, you are lifted up in his Kingdom. You reflect the exalted glory of the Son of Man. That’s what makes you truly great. Amen.