

## **“Who Is the Greatest Person You Know?”**

**Mark 9:30-37**

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Today, we'll examine a story which does not flatter the disciples. They come across as confused, frightened, embarrassed and egotistical. If you ever doubted the disciples were ordinary people, this story should settle this issue. Listen as I share the details.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Capernaum when the disciples began discussing something apart from Jesus. Even though Jesus did not enter into the discussion, he apparently overheard it, especially when it turned into an argument.

When they arrived at their destination, Jesus asked the disciples what they were arguing about along the way. They did not answer him, probably out of embarrassment.

Jesus had just informed them, for the second time, he was heading to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die at the hands of his enemies, which was met with confusion, fear and silence. You would think after the disciples had time to process this news on their walk to Capernaum, they would talk about ways to rally around and support Jesus during this stressful time. They did not though. Instead, they argued about which of them was the greatest, apparently so that disciple could assume the leadership role when Jesus was gone.

I am sure Jesus was disappointed in and frustrated with the disciples. It appears their association with Jesus made them arrogant and power hungry, eager to elevate themselves over others. So, he gathered the disciples around him to address their out-of-control egos and said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Then he took a little child and put it among them. Taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’.”

Why do you think Mark included this incident in his narrative? What message was he sending his readers? Here is what I thought about as I pondered these questions last week.

**Don't focus so much upon your own life you cannot see the challenges others are facing.** After Jesus told the disciples what awaited him in Jerusalem, what did they do?

Unbelievably, they argued over which of them was the greatest disciple, missing a timely opportunity to minister to Jesus when he could have used their support.

How many opportunities have you missed to help someone because you were preoccupied with what you wanted? Don't let that happen this week. Look beyond your desires to the needs of those around you.

**Learn to live with mystery as a believer because you will never understand everything about life and faith.** You may recall the first time Jesus told the disciples about his death, Peter rebuked him. This time, Peter, and all the disciples, sat in silence, too confused or afraid to speak. I'm sure you can relate to them. I am confident Mark's readers could.

Mark wrote about twenty years after Jesus lived. These were not easy times for the early believers to live out their faith and be bold witnesses for Christ. It was getting increasingly hard to live by the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount and be as faithful to God as Jesus was. They were not always rewarded for doing right and lived constantly under the threat of persecution.

Why do good people suffer? How long would they have to live this way? Why should they remain faithful when some of those who did not seem to fare better than them? These were tough questions, made even more difficult by the lack of answers.

Have you ever asked these questions? Are you grappling with them now? I hope you take comfort in the fact the earliest disciples wrestled with them, too.

In times like these, what do you do? Be patient and faithful. The clouds will lift, and you will understand more than you do now, just as the disciples discovered. What they failed to understand on the road to Capernaum became much clearer after the resurrection.

Until that time comes, allow what you know to guide you and lean on God to help you be faithful. Ask God to use every experience you go through to teach you more about life and faith. God will do this for you, just as Jesus did for his disciples.

Did Mark have another message for his readers? I think so, and for me, it is this. **Learn what is important to God and pursue it.**

**What is important to God?** Based upon the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples that day in Capernaum, it is building safe, healthy, strong, inclusive communities by being thoughtful, selfless neighbors.

Seize every opportunity to lift up the fallen and help those who are struggling. Make no decisions which would benefit you at the expense of others. Use the talents, skills and resources you have to make the world better for everybody, not just you.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Once again, what were the disciples arguing about on their way to Capernaum? They were trying to determine which of them was the greatest. I don't know what their criteria were for determining this, but I am confident it was not the same as God's. By God's standards, no one would become great by climbing on the backs of others, but by lifting others onto their shoulders. In the Kingdom of God, greatness is determined by what you do for others, especially the weakest, lowest and most vulnerable, not what you do for yourself.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

**Why did Jesus hold a child in their midst during this lesson?** Who has more needs than a child? Who demands more patience and sacrifices from us than our children? No one I know. So, what was his point?

If you want to be great in God's eyes, treat everyone you meet along your way the same way a loving and responsible parent does a child. Get down on their level, listen to them, roll up your sleeves and respond to their need.

Jesus certainly modeled this. Do you recall the time a woman slipped up behind Jesus while on his way to Jairus' house to heal his sick daughter? For twelve years, she had suffered with an illness, in spite of her many attempts to find someone who could help her. Without being noticed, she merely wanted to touch the hem of his garment. When she did, Jesus stopped and asked who touched him.

Of course, the disciples were puzzled because Jesus was surrounded by people who were brushing up against him. This touch was different, though, and he waited until a woman came forward and told her story. Jesus' reply to her has always intrigued me.

“Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease”  
Mark 5:34.

Why did Jesus refer to her as “daughter?” This was not his child. No, she wasn't, but he treated her as if she was. Since she had no advocate pleading her case like Jairus did for his daughter, he would be her father and for that moment, she would be his child.

This word “child” in our text can refer to a young boy or girl, but it also has a broader meaning. It can refer to someone of any age who is a new believer or is vulnerable and needy.

At times, all of us fit that category or know people who do. When we respond to someone's need with the same affection and care we do our own children, we catch God's attention and receive His affirmation.

**You know what the beauty of this is?** All of us can do this. We may not be voted most likely to succeed, best looking, most skilled, most powerful, win an Oscar or a Gold Medal in the Olympics, but this does not mean we'll never be great, at least in God's eyes.

All of us can build intimate relationships with those around us, responding to their needs by sharing what we have. We can stop, like Jesus did when the woman touched the hem of his garment, and listen to their story. We can make room for them in our lives and put their needs ahead of our own, as loving parents do for their children. We can make sure their voices are heard by those who make decisions which affect their lives. And when we do, we make our community a great place to live!

**Who did this for you?** Who made room for you when you needed it most? Who connected with you at a critical time in your life?

Who loved you when you didn't feel loveable, accepted you when you felt like an outsider, forgave you when you hurt them, encouraged you when you were ready to give up, walked with you when you felt all alone, and sat with you when you were sick?

I would be willing to say these are the greatest people you know. You have never forgotten them, have you? They changed your life for the better, and you are eternally grateful.

**Have you passed this forward?** Have their good deeds inspired and motivated you to reach out to those who need your help?

**Who would that be now?** Who needs to hear your words of encouragement or see you roll your sleeves up to help them? I hope you will do it in the coming week.

**And who would benefit from a conversation like Jesus had with his disciples?** Among your family and friends, who has the wrong view of what it means to be great and has misplaced their values and priorities?

I'll never forget hearing a disillusioned Kentucky politician say almost thirty years ago, "I climbed the ladder of success only to discover it was leaning on the wrong wall." Who needs your help to move their ladder? Whose help do you need to move yours?

