

I am the Greatest

Mark 9:32-37

INTRODUCTION

- A. We have a real problem in our culture with people thinking they are better than everyone else.
 - 1. It appears that this has been a problem for a long, long time.
 - 2. For example, from Greek mythology comes the story of Narcissus.
 - a. As the legend goes, Narcissus was so good looking that every maiden who ever saw him fell in love with him.
 - 1) However, he was so arrogant and rude that he cared for no one but himself.
 - 2) One day he rebuffed the wrong girl.
 - b. A beautiful nymph named Echo fell in love with Narcissus.
 - 1) She kept calling out to him one day while Narcissus was walking in the forest.
 - 2) When she finally revealed herself and attempted to embrace him, Narcissus ran deeper and deeper into the forest.
 - c. Because he had rebuffed her Narcissus was condemned to spending the rest of his life looking at his reflection in a pool of water.
 - 1) He did not know that it was just a reflection, however, and he was enamored by the beauty he saw.
 - 2) As he continued to look into the water, he grew pale and weak and finally turned into the flower that bears his name.
 - 3. In the old German fairy tale Snow White, the evil queen repeatedly asks her magical mirror: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is fairest of them all?”
 - a. The mirror always answered “‘Tis you.” That is, until Snow White became seven, at which point the mirror answered, “Queen, you are full fair ‘tis true, but Snow White is fairer than you.”
 - b. The Queen became enraged and sought a way to poison Snow White.
- B. This morning’s text is no myth, no fairy tale; every word is true.
 - 1. Yet, we have that same theme: Am I better than you are?
 - 2. Mark’s placement of this narrative is quite significant.
 - a. Throughout chapter nine, we see a common thread of greatness.
 - 1) The chapter opens with Jesus’ promise that his kingdom will come with “power” (v 1). The coming of his kingdom was going to be great.
 - 2) Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him up a mountain and is transfigured (vv 2-13).
 - a) Talk about greatness: seeing the Son of God in all his radiant splendor!
 - b) Peter understands that greatness and says, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (v 5).
 - 3) Verses 14 through 29 talk about great faith the disciples lacked, the faith and prayer necessary to cast out a demon.
 - 4) The chapter then discusses Jesus’ death and resurrection (vv 30-32), events which would demonstrate his greatness.
 - 5) After our text, we read again about how great the disciples thought they were. They were so great that they had to tell someone performing miracles—but who wasn’t one of the Twelve—to stop (vv 38-41).
 - b. It is apparent from this chapter that the apostles really thought they were something.
 - 1) Jesus has to teach them better.
 - 2) As we think about being the greatest, we see **THE ARGUMENT, THE ANSWER, & THE ATTENTION.**

THE ARGUMENT, vv 33-34

- A. “When [Jesus] was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you discussing on the way?’ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.”
- B. Mark’s Gospel is one of action—it seems that Jesus and his disciples are always moving from one place to another.
 - 1. In this passage, Jesus and the Twelve were moving through Galilee on their way to Capernaum.
 - 2. When they arrive and Jesus gets situated in the house, he calls the disciples and wants to know what they

were discussing on the way.

- a. The Greek word for “discuss” or “dispute” or “argue” means to engage in some relatively detailed discussion. This isn’t just a surface discussion, but this is really getting into the heart of the argument—this is leaving no stone unturned.
- b. This is also in the imperfect tense in Greek which refers repeated action. This is something which kept coming back up and back up. The disciples were not about to leave this argument.
3. When Jesus asked them what they were discussing, they kept silent.
 - a. There’s a great paradox here—they couldn’t keep their mouths shut, but when Jesus says, “Hey, what have you been talking about?” they clam up.
 - 1) Aren’t we a lot like that often? Our bark is so big—“I’m going to tell so-and-so this or that”—but when we get the chance, we aren’t going to say a word.
 - 2) You know why our bark is often so much bigger than our bite. We understand that if we say what we really want to say, we’re going to look foolish.
 - b. That certainly seems to be the case with the disciples in this passage, for they had been arguing about who was the greatest
- C. The disciples had been discussing who was the greatest.
 1. Social standing was quite important in the ancient world.
 - a. If you had sufficient capital, you could advance economically.
 - 1) But, most people in the ancient world lacked sufficient capital—they couldn’t live the “American dream”—and thus, they were condemned to live out the role assigned to them by birth.
 - 2) Even if they could advance economically, people could not break into the aristocracy.
 - b. In other circles, rank was determined by birth, age, or knowledge of the Law.
 2. With our knowledge of the social world, it seems reasonable that the disciples had different criteria for rank they were discussing back and forth.
 - a. Perhaps Matthew claimed that since he was a tax collector and, therefore, likely wealthy, he was the greatest.
 - b. Maybe Peter said, “I’m a natural leader; I’m the greatest.”
 - c. Maybe Judas said, “I’m the treasurer. You wouldn’t eat if it weren’t for me. I have to be the greatest.”
 - d. No doubt many—if not all—of the disciples were putting forth reasons that they themselves were the greatest
 3. Likely, the disciples’ basic problem was their pride—each thought he was the greatest based on different criteria.
 - a. That pride is so very dangerous.
 - 1) “When [King Uzziah] was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense” (2 Chr 26:16).
 - 2) “On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, ‘The voice of a god, and not of a man!’ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (Acts 12:21-22).
- D. A very successful vacuum salesman always closed his sales with this line: “Let me show you something several of your neighbors said you couldn’t afford.”
 1. People would buy it just to prove how much better they were than what their neighbors thought.
 2. How great do we think we are?

THE ANSWER, v 35

- A. “He sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, ‘If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.’”
- B. The rabbis of Jesus’ day stressed humility, but they expected their disciples to serve them.
 1. Certainly that played a role in Peter’s shock when Jesus’ washed the disciples’ feet—Jesus wasn’t supposed to serve the disciples—he had it all backward.
 2. It’s impossible to know what the disciples understood about their future role at this point.
 - a. Yet, it’s certainly probable that they saw their role as going out and getting their own disciples after they learned enough from Jesus—that’s how Jewish society functioned in the first century.
 - b. Maybe they were looking quite forward to having their own disciples who would serve them—when their feet were dirty, a disciple would wash them; when they were thirsty, a disciple would get them water; if they needed a scroll to study, a disciple would get it.
- C. The Lord, however, totally reverses societal norms—Greatness doesn’t come through rank or having people serve you, greatness comes through service.
 1. If we want to be first, we must be last of all.
 - a. That’s a great paradox— we find greatness in humbling ourselves and becoming last—we don’t find

- 3) Now, Potter Children's Home and Family Ministries cares for children between 6 & 18 who need a loving environment, provides services for single mothers, and provides Christian counseling.
 - 4) Clinton and Mary Potter began a ministry of caring for people who would never be able to repay them, people who were truly helpless.
 - 5) Shall we minister likewise?
- D. The one who receives such a child in Jesus' name receives Jesus, and whoever receives Jesus receives the Father.
1. In antiquity, a person's representative had full authority to act on behalf of his patron.
 2. So, Jesus equates himself with the helpless.
 - a. In serving the helpless, we serve Jesus.
 - b. At the Great Judgment scene, Jesus says to the righteous: Mt 25:35-40.
 3. The story has often been told about a lady who went to sleep and had a dream in which Jesus spoke to her.
 - a. Jesus told her, "You need to get ready. I'm going to come by your house for a visit tomorrow."
 - b. She woke up early, for there was much work to be done—the house was a mess and she had no food fit to serve the Lord.
 - 1) As she walked to grocery store, she saw a homeless man. She tried to walk more quickly, but he stopped her and asked for money. "Sir," she replied, "Jesus is coming to my house today, and I need to save my money to buy him a nice meal."
 - 2) As she arrived back at her home, a child came over and said, "Hi, Kate, my mom needs some sugar and was wondering if she could borrow some." "I'd love to help you, Jimmy, but Jesus is coming tonight, and I've got to fix a big cake."
 - c. Kate worked around her house and in her kitchen for hours and hours and sat down to wait for Jesus, but he never came.
 - d. Disappointed, she went to bed and in her exhaustion was soon overcome with sleep.
 - 1) Jesus again comes and appears to her, and she said, "Lord, I cooked a nice meal, I cleaned the house, I worked hard, and you never came."
 - 2) "Oh, yes, I did," said Jesus. "I was there in the man you passed in the street, and I was there in the little child you turned away,"
 4. Shall we turn Jesus away, or shall we serve him by serving others?