

TRUE GREATNESS

Mark 9:30-50

Key Verse: 9:35

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

In today's passage, Jesus teaches us how to be truly great. His teachings may surprise you. Let us listen to him!

I. THE SON OF MAN IS GOING TO BE BETRAYED (30-32)

Look at verses 30-31a. *"They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples."* Jesus spent much of his public life in Galilee. He did most of his teaching there and performed most miracles there. Most of his disciples were from Galilee. But now he was leaving Galilee for the last time. He was on his way to Jerusalem to die on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. So this time, he just passed through Galilee. He did not want many people crowd around him because he wanted to teach his disciples. What did Jesus want to teach his disciples? Look at verse 31b. *He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."* The disciples were still resisting the idea of suffering. They would not accept the meaning of his death and resurrection. Normally, Jesus would love to be in the middle of a large crowd, teaching them the kingdom of God and healing the sick. But this time, he really wanted to help his disciples to accept his upcoming suffering and death so that they may take up their cross and continue the redemptive work of God after his departure.

How did his disciples react to Jesus' repeated teaching of his crucifixion and resurrection? Verse 32 says, *"But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."* They did not understand it? Well, we know they were not super smart guys. But they were intelligent enough to understand it. Yet, when it came to this particular subject, it says that they did not understand what Jesus meant. And they were afraid to ask him about it. The disciples did not understand because they didn't want to understand. Jesus wasn't teaching them nuclear physics or differential calculus. He was teaching them that he had to pay the price of their sins in order to save them because they couldn't do it themselves. The disciples decided not to accept this principle of life through sacrifice because they did not want to suffer. God even told them to listen to Jesus on the transfiguration mountain. But they didn't want to listen. So they could not understand. They didn't even want to ask Jesus about it because they knew Jesus would talk about suffering again. They were afraid of hearing the answer.

How about us? Are we willing to listen to Jesus when he wants us to accept something we don't want to? How can we come to know the heart of God if we refuse to listen to his word? How can we obey his will if we are afraid of asking him? When we study

the Bible, we should listen to Jesus carefully instead of insisting on our own ideas, and we should not be afraid to ask him.

II. WHO IS THE GREATEST? (33-35)

So Jesus was passing through Galilee with a heavy heart because he was concerned about his disciples who didn't want to accept the way of the cross. Meanwhile, what were the disciples arguing about as they followed Jesus? Look at verses 33-34. *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* Jesus was trying to teach them the way of the cross but they were arguing about who was the greatest. They knew that it wasn't a right thing to do. So they kept quiet when Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"

Why did the disciples argue about who was the greatest when Jesus was trying to teach them about his upcoming suffering, death and resurrection? Perhaps they still believed that Jesus was a political messiah who would restore the kingdom of Israel (Ac 1:6). They were probably jockeying for cabinet positions. A more fundamental question here is why do men want to be great? We may not admit this, but we all want to be great. No one wants to be inferior to others. Why do you think this is? I believe that it is because our God, who is great, created us in his own image. He gave us potential to be great. In this sense, it is not wrong for us to have an ambition to be great. The problem is that many people have a wrong idea about what it means to be great. They don't know how to be truly great. So Jesus teaches us in today's passage how to be truly great.

Look at verse 35. *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."* Wait a minute, did we hear him right? Did he say, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all"? We know that this is not the way people of this world perceive greatness. There are some historical figures that have the title of "the Great" attached to their names. For example, Herod the Great ruled Judea at the time of Jesus' birth. Unlike his title, he was a man who was paranoid about losing his power. He ordered the killing of all baby boys around Bethlehem when he heard about the birth of the "king of the Jews." He also murdered his own wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle and many others. Alexander the Great conquered most of the ancient world, but he died at the age of 33 after an all-night drinking party. I could go on to talk about these so-called "great" men in history. But as we look at their lives closely, they don't seem to be that great. They lived for themselves. They enjoyed their power at the expense of others' lives. They were not blessing to other people. They were not great in the eyes of God.

On the other hand, Jesus said that among those born of women, there is no one greater than John the Baptist (Lk 7:28). Humanly speaking, John's life was tragic. He was killed in his tender age of early 30's for speaking the truth. His head was cut off and served on a platter. No parents want to see this happen to their son. But Jesus said he was greater than anyone in the world. Why? John the Baptist was born to an elderly couple. He grew up studying the word of God and learning a spiritual value system from his parents. He began his mission life by going to a desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance.

He lived a simple life, wearing a camel-hair suit that doubled as a blanket at night and eating whatever was available to him, like locusts and honey. John wasn't afraid of speaking the truth, no matter where and no matter to whom. He told King Herod and his wife to repent for their sin of adultery. John lived a life of mission. He didn't live for small pleasures of this world, as many people do. He lived a life that fulfilled God's purpose. John became very popular and some people wondered if he was the Messiah (Lk 3:15). But John magnified Jesus. He said that Jesus must become greater; he must become less (Jn 3:30). That's why he was a great man in the sight of God.

Jesus' life is the best example of how we can become great in the eyes of God. St. Paul says the following in Philippians 2. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Php 2:5-11).

III. WHOEVER WELCOMES A CHILD IN JESUS' NAME (36-37)

Look at verses 36-37. *He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."* What does it mean to welcome little children in Jesus' name? It means to welcome and embrace the helpless and the needy. Little children are helpless. They are dependent. They are needy. They may be burdensome at times. In many ways, today's young people are like little children. They are helpless before sin. They may be burdensome when they are proud and rebellious. They need someone to care for them. Jesus wants us to welcome them in his name. He wants us to help the helpless. Helping the helpless is not an easy task, because helpless people demand a lot from others. Spiritual babysitting is a difficult job. But we must remember how Jesus babysat us when we were helpless because of our sins. To understand the heart of Jesus, we must learn to help the helpless. Without helping the helpless, we cannot fully appreciate the love of Jesus. Most of all, Jesus wants us to be truly great by helping the helpless. One measure of our greatness is how many helpless people we serve in Jesus' name.

Jesus says: *"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."* If we welcome a helpless person in Jesus' name, we actually welcome Jesus. Jesus wants us to see each person through his compassionate heart. There are many spiritually needy people on our campus. We must welcome them in Jesus' name. We must share the word of God with them. Proud people cannot embrace and take care of helpless people. But those who humbly welcome the helpless and take care of them are truly great in the eyes of God, because that is what God desires. Are we humble enough to hear the voice of Jesus? May God help us to listen to Jesus' word: "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me"!

IV. WHOEVER IS NOT AGAINST US IS FOR US (38-41)

As they continued their journey toward Jerusalem, John said to Jesus, *"We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."* John thought this man was infringing on their trademark when he drove out demons in Jesus' name. So he told the man not to do this. Maybe John gave the man a warning: "If you do this again, you will hear from our lawyers." Then he came to Jesus to report it: "We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." Perhaps he thought Jesus would commend him for what he did. What did Jesus say to him? Look at verses 39-40, *"Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us."* Jesus teaches that we should be broad-minded and embrace those who work in the name of Jesus Christ. A narrow-minded person cannot be a great servant of God. We must recognize those who work in the name of Jesus as our fellow coworkers. We should be Jesus-centered, not organization-centered. We love our ministry because we love Jesus, not because we are better than others. We should recognize other ministries and other servants who serve the Lord and work with them whenever we can.

V. HOW SERIOUS IS CAUSING SOMEONE TO SIN? (42-49)

Look at verse 42. *"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck."* Jesus did not use hyperbole very often. But when he talked about sin problem, he did not shy away from graphic language. It is because sin kills a person's soul. Causing a young person to sin is a serious matter. Some people would say, "What I do is my own business." But Jesus teaches us that we are responsible for our influence on others. Parents and teachers have influence on children by what they do as well as what they say. Young people are easily influenced by what they see and what they hear. In this information age with TV, magazines, Internet and cell phones, they often see and hear things that cause them to sin. The immoral lives of celebrities, the hypocrisy of political and religious leaders, pornography, and violent games are some examples. But casual things we do and thoughtless things we say may also cause little ones to stumble. Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to the man through whom they come! A truly great man would not cause a young person to sin by indulging in his sinful desires.

Look at verses 43-49. *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' Everyone will be salted with fire."* I heard that a man in Pittsburgh took these words literally and gouged out one of his eyes. But amputating a hand or a foot, or gouging out an eye would not solve our sin problem. Sin is so terrible that we cannot get rid of it by cutting off parts of our body. Only Jesus the Lamb of God can take away our sin and give us life. So what is the point of these verses? Jesus says that we must deal drastically with whatever causes us

to sin, for sin leads us to the hell of eternal fire. We must struggle to remove our old habits or old human relationships that can cause us to stumble. We must cut them off, even though it is painful. This matter concerns our life in eternity!

VI. SALTY CHRISTIANS (50)

Look at verse 50. “*Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.*” Salt gives flavor to food. Salt also preserves food. A salty Christian is one with good influence on others. Our society is reeking with dirty, smelly sins. We must be salty so that we can preserve faith and love of God among us. A salty Christian is also thirsty Christian—thirsty for the truth of God.

Today we learned that to be truly great, we must know Jesus personally, follow him with a humble learning mind, and serve young people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should take care of the helpless and learn to cowork with other servants of God. We should not cause others to sin; instead, we should be salty Christians who have good influence on young people. May God help us to be truly great men and women in his eyes!