

“Who Is the Greatest?”
(Mark 9:33-37)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. This morning, we return to our study in the Gospel of Mark:
 - a. Last time, we saw Jesus heading south, towards Jerusalem,
 - b. Because the time was drawing near for Him to lay down His life.
 - c. He didn't want others to know where He was,
 - d. So He wouldn't be delayed.
2. We also saw that as He traveled,
 - a. He continued to prepare His disciples for His coming death,
 - b. So that when it came, they would be ready to carry on the work.
3. Their conversation along the way, however, revealed another issue.
 - a. Something else they needed to know,
 - b. So that they could serve Jesus better.
 - c. They needed a lesson in humility.

B. Preview.

1. Our text answers the question, Who is the greatest in God's kingdom?
 - a. You've likely asked yourself this question at some time in your life,
 - (i) Though perhaps you haven't necessarily thought it would be you,
 - (ii) Just as I haven't thought it would be me.
 - b. The disciples asked this question and were debating it among themselves.
 - (i) Jesus and His disciples had just arrived at Capernaum,
 - (a) And when they had come together in the house
 - (b) Jesus asked them what they had been talking about along the way.
 - (ii) No one answered –
 - (a) You know how it is when someone asks you what you were doing or saying
 - (1) But you were doing or saying something you shouldn't have been;
 - (2) You just don't answer,
 - (3) At least not right away as you try to think of an answer that is true
 - (4) But at the same time won't incriminate you.
 - (b) They were talking about who among them was the greatest –
 - (1) Presumably in God's kingdom.
 - (2) Which of them would have the place of greatest honor.
 - (3) Since this was a pride issue –
 - (4) And pride in sin –

- (5) They didn't want to answer.
 - (iii) But Jesus already knew what they were discussing,
 - (iv) And so He thought it wise to answer their question.
- c. Who is the greatest?
 - (i) Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."
 - (ii) And since there's no better way to communicate than through an object lesson, Jesus gave them one.
 - (a) It's not clear that that's what He's doing in what Mark writes,
 - (b) But it is clear in Luke:
 - (1) "An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side, and said to them, 'Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great'" (Luke 9:46-48).
 - (2) The one who is the least among you – who is like this child – is the one who is great.
 - (b) We can gain a little more insight from Matthew's Gospel, "And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, 'Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me'" (18:2-5).
 - (1) In one sense, you have to become like children before you can enter the kingdom.
 - (2) But having entered, you must humble yourself like a child if you are to be among the greatest.
- 2. This morning, let's consider that the way to greatness in God's kingdom is by way of service – you must become the servant of all.
 - a. First, we'll look at the example Jesus gives, and what it means.
 - b. Second, we'll consider how to apply this.

II. Sermon.

- A. First, let's consider the example Jesus gives of being the least: a child. The question we should ask first is what Jesus has in mind here.
 - 1. There are those who consider this to mean that children are innocent.
 - a. That somehow, they don't have a sin nature,
 - (i) Or if they do, it doesn't turn on to the point where they become guilty until they're older –
 - (ii) Until they've reached the age of accountability.
 - (iii) They think, What better example from which to draw

- (iv) Than from that of the innocence of children?
- b. Whoever thinks this must never have had any children
 - (i) Or reflected on their own heart when they were children.
 - (ii) Children aren't innocent.
 - (iii) In Adam, all die (1 Cor. 15:22).
 - (iv) All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).
 - (v) There is none who does good, there is not even one (v. 12).
 - (vi) So why does Jesus point to children?
- 2. Another possibility is because very young children haven't grown enough yet
 - a. To exhibit the proud and sinful characteristics of sinful man,
 - b. They're really the best example Jesus could point to of humility.
 - (i) When children are very young, they might be selfish and self-centered,
 - (ii) But they haven't quite fully learned the concept of the pecking order.
 - (iii) They don't try so hard to one up one another, but are fairly accepting of one another.
 - (iv) They are certainly humble when it comes to their interaction with adults,
 - (v) Compared to what they will become.
 - (vi) Perhaps Jesus was pointing to these characteristics.
- 3. There is another possibility that isn't often explored:
 - a. That this child was actually converted.
 - b. Luke doesn't mention anything regarding this,
 - c. But Matthew and Mark do.
 - (i) Matthew records Jesus as saying, "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of *these little ones who believe in Me* to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (18:4-6).
 - (ii) And Mark, still recording the same conversation of Jesus with His disciples, writes the same in verse 42, "Whoever causes *one of these little ones who believe to stumble*, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea."
 - d. What we may have here is a converted child,
 - (i) Who because of his or her young age and the power of the Spirit of God,
 - (ii) Is in fact humble.
 - (iii) It does appear to be the case, sadly, that as we grow older in the Lord
 - (a) We experience more of a temptation towards pride.
 - (b) When we're first converted, we're just happy to be in the kingdom.
 - (c) But after we've been in the kingdom a while,
 - (1) We want to make our mark.
 - (2) The apostles were thinking about making their mark –
 - (3) How they would be rewarded, how they would be remembered –

- (4) Instead of simply being humble servants.
- (5) If they kept this up, none of them would be greatest.

B. Let's apply this now with regard to how you can be great in the kingdom of heaven.

- 1. If you and I are going to attain some measure of greatness before the Lord, first of all understand that you can't do it the way the world does.
 - a. Those of the world most often gain greatness at the expense of others.
 - (i) If getting ahead means lying about someone else,
 - (ii) Or taking credit for their ideas,
 - (iii) Or taking advantage of them in some way
 - (iv) So that they can stand out,
 - (v) And gain that recognition and praise,
 - (vi) That's what they'll do.
 - b. Their whole purpose in life is to draw attention to themselves.
 - (i) Jesus reproved the Pharisees for doing this very thing:
 - (a) They blew the trumpet before they gave (Matt. 6:2),
 - (b) Or stood on the street corner to pray (v. 5),
 - (c) Or belittled others to make themselves look better,
 - (d) At least in their own eyes,
 - (e) As the Pharisee did the tax collector
 - (f) Who happened to be in the Temple on the same day (Luke 18:10-14).
 - (ii) There are those who are concerned about nothing else
 - (a) Than leaving their mark on this world.
 - (b) They want to be remembered after they're dead.
 - (c) They want greatness.
 - (1) Everyone wants to be great,
 - (2) They want credit for what they do,
 - (3) They want honor.
 - (4) They want glory for themselves.

2. Jesus says you are not to be like this.

- a. If you are in His kingdom, you must seek to be the least, if you are to be the greatest.
 - (i) That's exactly what Jesus did,
 - (ii) And why He is the greatest in His kingdom,
 - (a) As we saw in our reading of the Law, "Although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven

- and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:6-11).
- (b) Jesus said to His disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28).
 - (c) If you want to be great, you must humble yourself to become the least.
- b. Very young children sometimes do things for their parents simply for the pleasure of pleasing them, not for praise – though they don’t mind praise.
- (i) This is what you are to do.
 - (ii) There’s a hymn we sometimes sing in our hymnal – “Come, Thou Almighty King” –
 - (a) And every time we do, I’m struck by the author’s name: Anonymous.
 - (b) Someone in the 18th Century went through all the trouble to write this hymn
 - (c) But apparently didn’t take any credit for it.
 - (1) Now I’m not sure why this is.
 - (2) It might have been because of the times – it might not have been wise or safe to be recognized as the author –
 - (3) Or it could have been that he didn’t want the credit
 - (4) But simply wanted to write a hymn that would give glory to God
 - (5) Without drawing attention to himself.
 - (iii) Sometimes authors can’t avoid putting their names to their work
 - (a) For the sake of its acceptance by a particular group.
 - (b) But other times people put their names to what they do
 - (c) Because they’re seeking the honor that will come to them because of it.
3. Who will be the greatest in God’s kingdom?
- a. Who will sit on His right hand and His left?
 - (i) Those places of honor, Jesus said, were not His to give, “but . . . for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father” (Matt. 20:23)?
 - (ii) Will it be
 - (a) Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, Edwards, Spurgeon?
 - (b) It’s possible we may not even recognize them when we see them.
 - (c) These six have already received a great deal of honor from the Father and the Son.
 - (d) Perhaps those who will sit at His right and left
 - (1) Did their work so well concealed,
 - (2) That no one ever knew they honored Him so greatly.
 - (3) They took what Jesus said to heart so completely,

- (A) That they always stayed behind the scenes so that no one could see them,
 - (B) When He said, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 6:1).
- b. What about you?
- (i) What honor will the Lord give you?
 - (a) Sometimes it’s hard not to want to blow your own horn,
 - (b) Especially when it seems like everyone around you is doing it.
 - (c) You’ve got to resist!
 - (1) Every time you do, you lose your reward
 - (2) And the honor that otherwise would have been yours.
 - (ii) If you want to be great in God’s kingdom,
 - (a) Resist the spotlight,
 - (1) Resist putting yourself ahead of others.
 - (2) Don’t take the credit,
 - (3) Or try to gain recognition for yourself.
 - (4) Draw attention to others instead,
 - (5) And especially to the Lord.
 - (b) As much as possible, serve in secret.
 - (1) Pray in the public gatherings, but give yourself to secret prayer.
 - (2) Give, but do your giving in secret.
 - (3) When you minister to others,
 - (A) Try to do it in such a way that the recipients of your ministry
 - (B) Don’t know to whom they are indebted.
 - (c) You can’t always avoid the eyes of others,
 - (1) But when they see you, make sure
 - (2) That your light is shining in such a way,
 - (3) That if they see your good works
 - (4) They will glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16).
 - (iii) And so after you have settled the question of your eternal destiny
 - (a) By trusting Jesus to save you
 - (1) And by turning from all your sins,
 - (2) Begin to serve Him in a way that reflects
 - (3) The humility of a child whose heart belongs to the Lord.
 - (b) Serve for the pure pleasure of serving and pleasing others,
 - (c) And the Lord will richly reward you. Amen.