

*Where we start . . .*

Children often cry out for “fairness” when it comes to dividing up some treat or taking turns on a piece of playground equipment. What do they typically mean by “fair”?

Where do you see adults doing the same sort of thing?

*What we read . . .*

After having spoken to them about real greatness, Jesus’ disciples still don’t fully understand. At least that seems to be the case as we read Mark 9:38-42.

What is John’s basic concern? (What issues raised earlier in the chapter might help clarify what is going on in John’s heart?)

What is the substance of Jesus’ reply? What does He want His disciples to see?

In what way is John appealing for “fairness”?

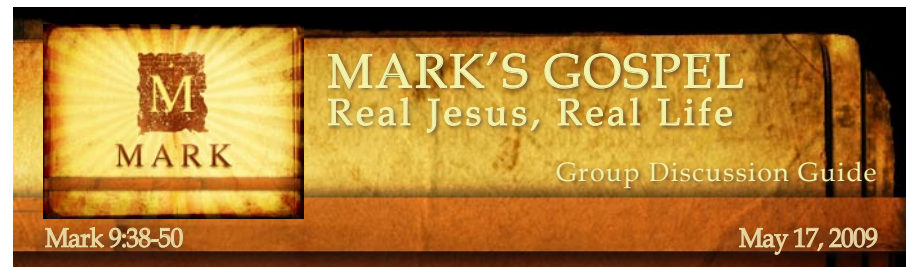
What is Jesus’ antidote for such a concern?

How serious does Jesus take the resistant attitude John appears to have toward that “someone” who is not with them? How do you know?

*Why this matters . . .*

Doctrinal purity is *not* in view in this exchange. What is?

How should Jesus’ primary concern here shape the way you relate to others in and through whom Jesus is working?



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*Diving in . . .*

When we struggle grasping the kind of life that Jesus wants for us, we can be encouraged . . . because the twelve seem to struggle grasping it as well. Jesus has just spoken to them about greatness coming through “lastness” and through becoming the servant of all. Right then, John raises the issue of opposing those who are not “with us.” Apparently, John thought that others shouldn’t be doing what they were doing unless they identified with John and his friends. And, that suggests that John still is thinking just a bit too highly of himself.

*Discussing . . .*

On the playground and in the elementary school, “fairness” is about the perception of equality. It is not so much a matter of what really *is*, as much as seems to be about the appearance of equality. The child thinks: “No one should stand out above me! No one should get what I don’t get.” And, perhaps what is behind that is a little bit of an overdeveloped sense of one’s own importance. And, sadly, it doesn’t always go away as we grow up.

We even see vestiges of this in John’s comments in this week’s passage.

Jesus has been teaching the disciples about the principles of “greatness” for all who would follow Him. Greatness, significance, value are to be measured by being “last of all” and “servant of all” (9:35). Just as Jesus will end up being treated as one who is last and just as He will give His life to serve all, so His followers are invited into that kind of life. And Jesus has explained this plainly.

And then, John speaks up. Apparently he has seen someone casting out demons “in Jesus’ name.” John doesn’t like that. What about it doesn’t he like? Is it that the other man is seemingly successful while the disciples themselves appear to be stymied in this ministry (9:9:14-29)? That may be part of it. But it is important to note that John’s concern is that “he was not following *us*” (9:38). John *doesn’t* say that this unnamed man wasn’t following *Jesus*; he, apparently, wanted the man to identify with himself and the other twelve. John didn’t want the man to stand out or stand above the twelve. So, John wants to hinder the man; set himself against this “other.”

Jesus’ response to John is very straightforward. John should immediately stop hindering the man. The language Jesus uses tells us that Jesus is not merely speaking to this one case. Jesus doesn’t want John (or any of the

disciples) to do this kind of thing any more.

What reason does Jesus offer? He explains that one who does such mighty works in His name isn’t an enemy but an ally. (Don’t miss the implication found here. Jesus isn’t condoning any and all “spiritual practices.” Only someone who is genuinely ministering “in My name” falls into the category of those who are not to be hindered. Merely claiming to be “Christian” is not enough; ministering consistent with the character and purpose and nature of Jesus is critical.) Even if this unnamed man is not doing things just the way the twelve are, it doesn’t mean he is to be opposed. In fact, Jesus says that giving a cup of water (in other words, even simple, basic support) is to be offered to all who are servants of Jesus.

Many Bibles insert a paragraph break (and, often, a new “subject heading”) between verses 41 and 42. That heading and break might be misplaced. It seems that Jesus is continuing His thoughts.

John has sought to hinder someone who is seeking (as best as he is able) to be involved in Jesus’ own ministry; although this “someone” is not approaching it exactly as were the twelve. When Jesus goes on to speak about the “little ones who believe” (9:42), the immediate context suggests that Jesus has in mind just such a person as this unnamed exorcist.

The word translated “sin” in many versions (in 9:42) is not the typical word for “sin;” it is the word “to stumble.” Jesus appears to be underscoring the seriousness of hindering someone who is seeking to live out his or her faith in Jesus as best as they are able. Jesus is cautioning John (and all the readers of Mark!) that to cause someone who is seeking to live out the purpose and personality of Jesus to stumble or get tripped up through attempting to hinder or oppose them is unacceptable. Jesus uses dramatic hyperbolic imagery to point out how serious He is about this. He is *not* saying that someone who trips up or hinders another believer *will be killed*; He is only saying that such an act is so heinous that, apart from grace, it would be better to be drowned than do such a thing.

Sadly, we don’t take Jesus’ call to be servant of all with the sober understanding that He invites. If we were truly the least and the servant of all, then when Jesus was moving in and through someone else, we would offer support (9:41) rather than hinder or denigrate him or her (9:38-39). Even if that other person was not doing things exactly as we might, it doesn’t mean that he or she is *Jesus’ enemy* (9:39-40). And if such a one is not Jesus’ enemy, then we should be encouraging and supporting her or him. That is what one who is “least of all” and “servant of all” would do.

We can all too easily think that if Jesus is working through someone in a way that is different than He does or has worked in and through us that it’s “just not fair!” We might fall prey to thinking that they “look better” than we do, being caught up in our quest for personal greatness. But if we really are going to experience and enjoy the life Jesus has for us, such thinking has to be laid aside.