

### **Mark 9:30-37**

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
Greatest and Least

The Word of the Lord from Mark 9:35: Jesus said, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Prior to his execution by the Nazis near the end of World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *Life Together*, all about living as Christians in a community. There are a few things in that book that I've especially taken to heart as a pastor who cares for a congregation.

One is the truth that whenever sinners gather together, they immediately begin to compare themselves to each other. It might be about dress or wealth, appearance or behavior, height or weight, singing voice or hair color, personality, promptness or quality of breath. It might be how their kids behave or misbehave compared to others. Before you know it's happening, you're sizing up people around you and comparing yourself to them. It might be in service to pride, so that you can feel superior to others. It might be in service to despondency, because you just don't feel like you measure up. It might be in service to sloth, because you feel like others are better suited to do menial tasks around the facility. But when sinners compare themselves to each other, it is almost never for a good reason. It is rightly said that comparison is the thief of joy: rather than rejoice in whom God has made you to be, you are disappointed in who you are, earnestly trying to be somebody else, or distancing yourself from people who aren't as good as you. It's what sinners do.

The next truth from Bonhoeffer follows the first: *since you are* going to compare yourself to others as soon as you come to church for any activity, you must come to every activity by saying, "I am the worst of sinners." If you are the worst of sinners, there is nobody worse than you (so much for pride!). If you are the worst of sinners, there is nobody who deserves to be snubbed, who doesn't deserve your help. If you're at the bottom, it means that there's nobody below you. When you compare yourself to everybody else, you're worse. And while all of that may sound like a downer, it sets you free – it sets you free to serve. You're set free to be the servant of all: rather than ask, "Why doesn't somebody do something about that?", you're more likely to think, "Why not me?" You're even set free to do menial tasks around church without resentment, because, for instance, who deserves to scrub the toilets if not the worst of sinners?

A third truth from Bonhoeffer dovetails with the other two: it is always dangerous to expect that a congregation will be the ideal community. Ideals are about perfection: and if you've got a congregation full of sinners, especially the worst of sinners, things will never be perfect. Not even close. If you idealize the church, you're always going to be disappointed with everything, and you'll always be distracted from the joy that Christ comes here to save sinners. If you expect a congregation to live up to an ideal and it doesn't, first you'll blame everybody else in the congregation because they don't share your zeal for perfection. After a while, you'll blame God because, after all, He's in charge. You might finally get around to blaming yourself, that you just haven't tried hard enough to make a difference. By that time, you're one step away from staying home, sinfully deciding to be the perfect church of one by yourself.

A congregation will never be ideal. If someone remarks that they don't like church because it's *full* of sinners and hypocrites, the proper response is, "I object to that characterization, because we are not ... full." We have room for more.

I'm betting that, among other places in Scripture, Bonhoeffer draws all this from our gospel lesson. Jesus and His disciples arrive in Capernaum after a long and awkward journey; and for the last while, they've walked apart. Now that they've arrived, He asks them, "What were you discussing along the way?" They won't answer because they are ashamed. These are Jesus' closest followers, the ones who spend the most time with Him. They've preached in His name and worked wonders by His authority. If anyone should be an example of Jesus' teaching, it should be these men. And what have these twelve men been talking about? They've been arguing about which one of them is the greatest: not the greatest sinner, but the greatest disciple. This pops up here and there throughout the Gospels, because the disciples don't understand how the kingdom of God works. They think it works like the kingdoms of this world, and so their math goes like this: obviously, Jesus has a lot of power. Therefore, He's only going to become more powerful. As He grows in power, He'll require assistance, and He'll likely draw His help from His inner circle. If that's what they're thinking, it only makes sense that each disciple wants to make the case that he's the best and brightest so that he gets to be Jesus' right-hand man.

At least, that might be their calculus. Or they might just be a bunch of tired, grumpy men with sore feet who each want to prove that they're better than everybody else.

Look at the disciples with Bonhoeffer in mind. If the disciples are talking about who is the greatest, they're obviously into comparing themselves to each other. And if each is arguing for glory, the only hymn they're singing is, "Chief of sinners though I be ... you guys are much worse than me." So when Jesus asks what they were discussing along the way, none of them wants to admit it because they know that this is not the way of Jesus.

Jesus knows what they were discussing, of course. He's the almighty, all-knowing Son of God. He calls them together and says, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Then He takes a child and puts him in the midst of them. Then He, the Lord of heaven and earth (who is also occupied with everything from keeping sparrows fed to making sure Jupiter keeps spinning the right way), takes this child into His arms. You're tempted to think that this is not unusual because you're pretty well-acquainted with Jesus, but put yourself in the disciples' shoes. Kings do not spend time holding babies and changing diapers: they have nannies and tutors and trophy queens for such things, while they go around being great. That's a far cry from Jesus, who makes it a point to bring a child into the conversation and embrace him. This Lord is for all people, not just for the powerful and well-to-do.

Then He says the most astonishing thing. He says, "Whoever receives one such child receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me." Did you catch it? He doesn't say, "Whoever receives one such child in My name is representing Me to this child." Although that's not wrong, it's not what He says here. No, He says, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me." And if that's not crazy enough, He adds, "and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."

To receive a little child in the name of Jesus is to receive God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth ... *and* Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord.

Now we have twin truths going. One is that the greatest of all is the servant of all, and so the greatest of all will even embrace, and care for, the least of all – a child. The other is that the one who cares for the least of all is, in effect, caring for the Son of God – and God the Father. Father and Son align themselves with the least of all.

Therefore, the one who receives the least of all is actually receiving the greatest of all.

In the kingdom of God, everything is turned upside down. Greatness isn't about power and strength and privilege, but about service and humility and sacrifice. It's not about ordering people around, but taking care of them. You see shadows of this in the world today where people still respond to

how God orders things, because the best leaders are the ones who know they are given authority to serve those placed under their care. Good parents know that parenting is all about using their authority to serve their kids, even though the kids often thanklessly feel like they're the slaves getting bossed around. Good officers in the military take care of their men: they don't show contempt for enlisted personnel. Good teachers are the ones who work hard in service to their students, putting in a lot of hours to help their pupils grow in knowledge, wisdom and virtue. Good pastors are servants of the Word, not lords of the congregation. All of that is true, and all such exercise of authority in this world is an echo of God's service to us.

In every relationship, whether you're the greatest or least, whether you're serving or receiving, there are already plenty of sins to confess and plenty of reasons to repent. Maybe you noticed that all of this goes well also with our epistle reading from James. However, if we stop there, we're still missing the big point.

See, we haven't talked about what happens just before the disciples' argument about greatness, what spurs their conversation on the road.

Our text is a turning point in the Gospel of Mark. For the first time, Jesus reveals the plan for how He will save the world from sin. He tells them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And when He is killed, after three days He will rise."

To you, that's old news, because you know the whole story. But put yourself in the shoes of the disciples, who are still getting used to the kingdom of God. So far, the career trajectory of Jesus has only been a meteoric rise, from a humble beginning in Bethlehem to a life where every speaking engagement is standing room only. It's been a great ride for the disciples, and they can only imagine it getting better and better: it's like accidentally being part of a tiny start-up that will later be called "Apple" or "Microsoft." But now, everything changes. Now, Jesus doesn't say, "I'm going to save the world by popularity and style." He says, "I'm going to be taken, abused and killed in a horrible manner."

He also tells them that He's going to rise from the dead, but there's no indication that the disciples even hear that part. All we know is that they don't understand what He is saying, and they are afraid to ask Him.

Instead, they somehow go from there to a conversation about which of them is the greatest. I've tried in my mind to figure out how you get from Jesus' words to the disciples' argument, and I can't come up with a good explanation; but I have learned not to underestimate the ability of sinful minds to turn from the death of Jesus to thoughts about personal greatness. We're very good at being bad.

Because the disciples' argument is framed by Jesus' prediction of His death, Jesus' words to His disciples about greatness take on a far more profound meaning. He's not just telling them how they ought to behave. He's starting to teach them how He will save by dying.

In the kingdom of God, the greatest serves the least. The first serves the last. The one with the power and authority exercises that power in service and sacrifice. Jesus has not become flesh in order to be a supervisor who tells you how to do better work, nor a life-coach to tell you how to go about better living. He has come to do what must be done: He has come to pay the price for the sins of the world, and the wages of sin is death. As He puts it in the book of Isaiah, He has come to be the suffering *Servant*.

Only He can do this. Only He can make the sacrifice for sin. Nobody less than the Greatest can save the world.

And the only way that the Greatest can save the world is by ... becoming the least in the kingdom of God. Who is the very least in the kingdom of God? The one who isn't in it; and who isn't in the kingdom of God? Unforgiven sinners. Therefore, the one with the most and greatest sins would be the very least of the least, and who is the one with the most and greatest sins? The One who has them *all* as He hangs on the cross. The Greatest of all becomes the Least of all by bearing all sin and its consequences to the cross, suffering hell and death there in the place of sinners.

Please note: Jesus does not *become* the Greatest by becoming the Least. He becomes the Least on the cross because He is already the Greatest from eternity. He is the Alpha and Omega, the *First* and the Last, long before He is the Least.

Because the First becomes the Last and the Servant of all, what have you become? Once upon a time, you were the least in the kingdom of heaven because you were an unforgiven sinner outside of it. But then you were brought in, born again by water and the Word. You're not just some lower-class worker bee in the kingdom of God: *for Jesus' sake, God the Father calls you His beloved child*. He says that His kingdom is your kingdom. Could there be a greater honor than that for you?

Furthermore, remember that to receive a little child in the name of Jesus is to receive Jesus. If receiving a little child seems an improbable route to greatness, receiving a crucified Jesus is even more so. It's impossible! Again, the gospel is old news to you: it's easy enough for you to say that you're saved because Jesus died for you. But apart from faith, it sounds ridiculous. Scandalous, even.

Yet, you believe it and hold fast to it. Why? Because Almighty God also sends forth His Holy Spirit to give you gifts of forgiveness and faith, to bring Jesus to you. The Triune God – the greatest beyond measure – labors together to save you. You! That's how the kingdom of God operates: the greatest – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – serves the least.

Two quick closing thoughts before we call it quits on this sermon.

First: whether at church or work or home or wherever, live as the worst of sinners redeemed by Jesus. Never say, "I'm above that task or too good for that work." If it needs to be done and you can do it within your callings, just step up and do it. You're set free to! That is how communities thrive. It's called greatness in the kingdom of heaven. It's also a tiny reflection of how your Savior stepped up to save you by His service, His sacrifice, His death and His resurrection.

Second: as we said before, you have an advantage over the disciples in our gospel reading: you know the end of the story. You know that Jesus did in fact die at the hands of sinners, that He rose again on the third day, and that all of this was for your salvation. Keep in mind, however, that there is a lot you don't know: you don't even know what's going to happen tomorrow. But there will be plenty of times in a dying world where, like the disciples, you do not understand, you're afraid and you don't know what to say. Hold fast to this: you're a part of the kingdom of God; and in that kingdom, things often seem turned upside down. But if God used the worst moment of all – man's execution of the Lord of life on the cross – for your good, He is still at work to use all things for your good now. The greatest God still serves you: the only true God who created you has given His Son to die for you and still pours out His Holy Spirit to keep you in the faith until He comes again. In other words, in all the mess of this world, you can be sure that heaven is yours because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen