

## King of the Hill

### Mark 9:33-37

©Copyright July 2, 2023 by Bruce Goettsche

Some of us remember when children used to spend all their time using their imagination playing outside. They would gather their friends (real flesh and blood friends as opposed to virtual friends) and would play games that involved actual physical exercise like capture the flag, baseball, pick up basketball games, hide and seek, and if you are in the right location, King of the Hill. The later is a simple game, You try to get on top of a hill before others and stay there while everyone else is trying to throw you down. While you are there, you are the King of the Hill. It doesn't sound like a lot of fun when compared to virtual reality games, but this actual reality game was still pretty cool. There is laughter, sweating, and group bonding that you aren't like to find with video games.

Today, we will see the disciples as they play their version of "King of the Hill". This is a version of the game with which we are all much too familiar.

In Mark's gospel, after the Transfiguration (the mountaintop experience) and the failure to heal a demon-possessed boy at the base of the mountain, we are told this:

<sup>30</sup> They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, <sup>31</sup> for he was teaching his disciples, saying to 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." <sup>32</sup> But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

These words are in such sharp contrast to what has just happened. Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah (perhaps representing the Law and the Prophets) and then He healed a boy who had been tormented by an evil spirit for years. The disciples had to be convinced that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. However, their idea of who the Messiah was did not include being delivered into the hands of men and being killed.

This is why Jesus was talking to these men in private. If He had said these things in public, His ministry might have collapsed because people would conclude He could not have been the promised Messiah. He was just another "Messiah-wannabe" or a crackpot (even with the miracles).

### **The True Mission of Jesus**

His words show us that Jesus was clear on what His mission was. He knew He was going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they would kill him . . . as a criminal! But . . . don't miss the "but"! He would rise after three days! Nothing that happened in the future was a surprise to Jesus, but it was all going to take the disciples by surprise. They did not understand because it was contrary to what they believed to be true.

Perhaps we can draw a preliminary lesson from the disciples: **don't hold so tight to your beliefs that you are unable to be taught or corrected.** We must hold the truths of the faith with conviction, but we must always LISTEN to what the Word of God is telling us. We need to submit all our beliefs to the correction of the Spirit through the Word of God. We must always be more devoted to the truth of Scripture than we are to our convictions or the teachings of men!

This is part of the danger of having so much information at our fingertips. We listen to teachers and podcasts, we read books, attend conferences etc. how thankful we should be for these resources. However, we may end up spending far less time actually in our Bibles. We hear what people tell us the Bible means without actually listening to and examining the text itself.

Incidentally, this is why we are so committed to Bible Studies in this church and why we want to continually preach systematically through the Word of God. It is the Word that will lead us to the truth. As well-meaning as preachers and teachers are . . . we are fallible. God's Word is not!

A second lesson from the disciples is: **if you don't know or understand something . . . ask questions!** These men had the Lord of life in their midst. Don't you think you would be asking Him questions all the time? Perhaps they didn't want to come across as unintelligent. To think this way is to show how unintelligent you really are! Questions do not show that you are stupid, it shows you are hungry to understand! It shows you are humble enough to admit when you need to augment your education. The prideful person feels they must pretend to have all the answers. There is nothing quite as pathetic as a person who acts like they know what they are talking about when the people who are listening know they don't understand anything.

The smartest people are often the people who are always asking questions because they are always learning something new.

## **The Right Way to Follow the Way of Jesus**

Our primary focus this morning is on verses 33-37 in Mark 9.

<sup>33</sup> After they arrived at Capernaum and settled in a house, Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you discussing out on the road?" <sup>34</sup> But they didn't answer, because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> He sat down, called the twelve disciples over to him, and said, "Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else."

<sup>36</sup> Then he put a little child among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> "Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not only me but also my Father who sent me."

Don't miss this! Jesus just told His disciples that He was going to suffer, die, and rise from the grave. They did not understand what He was teaching them. Yet while they walked together, the

disciples did not ask Jesus what He meant, they weren't even discussing it among themselves, they were arguing about which of them was the greatest!

There is a tendency in all of us when in a group to try to figure out the "pecking order." It is a phrase that comes from chickens. Bill Hybels once explained it this way,

Take ten chickens. Any ten. Put them in a pen together, and spread a little chicken feed. In short order, you will witness an amazing phenomenon. In a matter of minutes, the chickens, previously strangers, will form a hierarchy based on dominance; or, in everyday language, they will establish a Pecking Order. Instinctively, they will determine, through a series of skirmishes, who the Number One Chicken will be; then the Number Two; the Number Three and all the way down to the unlucky Number Ten Chicken.

Much is at stake in this dance of domination. Chicken Number One pecks at and intimidates Chicken Number Two, without experiencing any kind of retribution from Chicken Number Two. Chicken Number Two will take it from Chicken Number One but will turn around and peck away at Chicken Number Three, who will in turn, take out its frustration on Chicken Number Four. The Pecking Order continues all the way down to Chicken Number Ten, who needless to say, has a pretty miserable life: pecked, but no one to peck. (Descending into Greatness p. 115-116)

Like the chickens, we want to know where we fit in. It feels like the same thing is going on here. I suspect Peter, James and John argued that they were the true leaders of the group since they were the three Jesus often selected to come with Him on special assignments. But others may have argued for the miracles they conducted or the circumstance of their calling and so forth.

Jesus puts a stop to this nonsense immediately. He told them that when following Him, : "Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else." That is the way to turn things around. Yet, isn't that what we see in Jesus? He humbled Himself and took the form of man. He went from God the Son to an infant in Bethlehem. He went from living in God's kingdom to sleeping on the ground as a vagabond preacher. He went from hearing all Heaven rejoice at His presence, to hearing men who wanted Him dead. He went from the throne of Heaven and was nailed on a cross. And He did it all for us.

Paul picked up this theme in the book of Philippians, chapter 2:1-8

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
 did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
<sup>7</sup>rather, he made himself nothing  
 by taking the very nature of a servant,  
 being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
 he humbled himself  
 by becoming obedient to death—  
 even death on a cross!

Paul was picking up the ethic of Jesus who saw in other people a value they did not see in themselves. Our Lord welcomed Matthew, the despised tax-collector; the woman caught in adultery; the Samaritan woman at the well; Simon the Zealot; the woman with the issue of blood, and those who were possessed by demons. He welcomed fisherman, women, as well as the poor and needy. He also welcomed Judas, whom we suspect Jesus knew was going to betray Him. Jesus saw what the rest of the world did not. It is the same way He sees you and everyone else He made.

What a contrast to the “Me-First” society in which we currently live. It is because of this Me-first mentality that we now have

- Intimate relationships that are more about conquering and self-satisfaction than love.
- Jobs that are more about the paycheck than doing the job with excellence.
- Friendships which are strong only until there is no mutual advantage in being friends.
- Babies who are only cherished if they are “convenient,” or no extra burden.
- Worship that is no longer God-centered, or truth-centered, but about “meeting my needs” or stroking the ego of those on the platform.
- Older adults are viewed not as a source of wisdom and honor, but as a burden and a threat to the inheritance to which I am entitled!

Jesus used the illustration of a child. We are to be more childlike (not more “childish”)! The thing about a child is that, unless they are poisoned at an early age, they do not see

- The color of skin,
- a persons’ gender
- The things we call handicaps. The challenges they do see, they ask about and then move on. They are curious, not judgmental.
- They don’t think about age, they are more concerned about the heart. They gravitate to people who are nice and seem to care.
- They start out accepting everyone. There is no concern about rank or position, they see people just as people.

Jesus said to the disciples, they should knock off the “who is most important nonsense” and be more like children in this way. I hope we understand this, but in a world where how you rank

seems to be everything, we need to work at this. Let me suggest three principles for cultivating a more servant mentality.

**We Cannot Serve Each Other Until we first Learn to Serve the Lord.** We must start by recognizing that we are sinners needing God's grace. Our lives and our eternity depend on Him. We can only be saved by God's gracious hand extended to us.

Our tendency is to rank sin. You know, "I haven't sinned as much as that person!" That may be true or maybe you are just looking at the surface and not the sins of the heart, like the pride that makes us think we do not need the Savior as much as someone else. Until we recognize our own sin, and our own culpability for that sin, we will never get to that servant heart or find new life in Christ.

All sins are not the same in their effect on others, but EVERY SIN is a barrier between God and us. And believe me, that barrier can grow so thick over the years. The only hope any of us has is the grace of God through our Lord Jesus. We must confess our sinful hearts, repent of our sinful actions, and cling to the sacrifice of our Loving Savior. Every one of us is saved the very same way! It is by grace so that no one can boast.

This is where we must start. We have to "get" this message: "I am but a sinner who is saved by grace." As such, we owe our lives to our Lord. When He calls us to follow Him, it is not a burden, it is the greatest privilege we can participate in. Exalting ourselves is not good because it dims the light that can shine on Christ. We have read of too many Pastors and Christian leaders who have fallen in their lives and ministries because they forgot that they were but servants of the King. They forgot that the main character of life is not us but Him.

**WE Need to Understand that Our value is not in how we rank in the world . . . it is in how faithful we are in the tasks God has given to us.** Everyone who believes is a part of the Body of Christ. In Romans 12 we are told that God gives each of us gifts (or, if you will, jobs to do) as part of that body. Paul takes great pains to point out that no gift is more important than any other gift. Some are more visible, others seem to be more impactful or respected, but the body cannot function unless every part is doing its job.

On the last day God will not ask: "How popular were you?" or "How many followers did you have on Facebook or Instagram?" He will not ask, "How many people attended your church?" The one question will be: "Did you do what I tasked you to do?" In other words, His concern is that we use our gifts and abilities not to make a name for ourselves but to build up the body of Christ.

It is important to get this. Just because I stand on this platform does not mean I am more important than the guys back in the booth who regulate the sound and send out our livestream. We are not more important than the guys who take communion to shut-ins, or those who send cards to those confined to their homes. We are not more important than those who give generously beneath the radar, or those who pray fervently for others in their places of prayer.

Our job is to serve Him where He has called us to serve. As we do our part and other do theirs, God is honored, and the world takes notice.

When the people of the church cannot get along together, Jesus' words look ridiculous to the watching world. They see the church acting just like everyone else in the world even though we are called by the Lord to be different: to be kind, faithful, and encouraging as we share the message of God's incredible grace.

**We must learn to See and Treat Others with The Value GOD Gives to People, not the Value the World Gives Them (or us).** Think about all the ways people are "ranked" in our world. We rank people by their race, gender, age, education, weight, job, house, car, genetics (appearance), income, politics, marriage status, children, accolades received, athletic ability, talents possessed, success or public failures, and personality. No wonder the majority of people feel they are not "good enough." With social media and how people are so quick to attack and point out flaws in others, depression is on the steep rise! Even those who have had many advantages feel deficient because of something they believe is "wrong" with them.

Jesus wasn't like that. He saw the heart of people. He looked past their failures and saw what the person *COULD* be. He chose a ragtag group of followers according to the World's standards. Yet, these men changed the world with the spread of the gospel. Jesus went out of the way to talk to a woman at the well of Jacob in Samaria who had been ostracized by the people because she had been divorced 5 times! She was rejected because of her failures. Yet, Jesus saw who she could be and treated her with kindness and she told all the people in Samaria about Him. Jesus listened to the beggars on the street while everyone else told them to be quiet., He healed lepers and wasn't afraid to touch these people who were considered to be untouchable. He welcomed children that others said should be seen and not heard. He reached out to the demon-possessed who had been cast away and shunned by others.

Jesus did that in the past and He is still doing it. He sees you for the treasure you are and the greater treasure you can be. He wants us to see others the same way. Instead of trying to climb over the people around us; instead of using people as a means to an end; He wants us to serve others as the valuable people God made them. He wants us to see and spotlight the good in others even when they don't see it themselves. And we can't do that, until we take our eyes off of ourselves.

The Lord tells us that when we treat others with respect, honor, and dignity, we are treating Him that way. Let me say it again, when we serve others, we are serving Him. When we humble ourselves, we honor Him. In essence, we stop trying to grab the spotlight and instead turn where it should be . . . on the one who is the true King of the Hill.