

MARK — Greatness Isn't Found In First Place

Pastor Perry Burkholder

Mark 9:30–37

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

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.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child 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.”

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mk 9:30–37.

Galilee

Galilee is the first place that Jesus declared that, “The Kingdom of God is here!” at the beginning of Mark. So now we’re full circle and Jesus makes the claim that being last is first.

Now this claim flies in the face of our culture. If we think of examples in our time about the privilege of being first:

- First born
- First pick in sports
- First in line
- First at anything, whether earned or given

And now we think about how our culture treats those who are last:

- Last born
- Last in sports
- Last in line,
- Last pick for anything, whether earned or stolen from

How demoralizing is that, especially when it has to do with our value or skill?

It feels like we have nothing to offer and nothing anybody wants from us.



King Jesus however inaugurates his upside down kingdom with his kingdom ethic: Being in that lowest place of servitude is the best place to be.

Who Is the Greatest?

Perhaps one reason why the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest is because Jesus kept telling them that they were going to die. And the natural conclusion is, “who will take charge once Jesus dies?”



And Jesus’ response is not to rebuke them for desiring greatness; he redirects their desire to redefine what greatness is. This is a new worldview, an upside down kingdom, and a new lens through which we can look at what greatness is supposed to be about.

When we focus on being great, life becomes a stepping stone game of proving to everyone else who should be valued, and the stepping stones are other people.

And those people will be recognized for greatness for a time. The greatest athletes will be remembered for a time, but the greatest people are remembered across the ages for their sacrifice.

The system is so broken in terms of ascribing value to people. Some demographic for some time will be on top, and in 50 years, the rules change. In terms of the human metric for human value, it is relative and changes all the time.

But for Jesus, his metric was absolute — human value is determined by those who live according to the characteristics of God, and that is defined as stepping down and serving the rest.

Paul, the one who may be considered as someone in a place of power and prestige makes this claim:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of

prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1 Cor 13:1–3.



The corporate ladder has nothing compared to filling people with love and acceptance; or at least that's Paul's claim.

Our Living Room

Greatness isn't a ladder we climb, it's a living room we fill.

The only currency in Jesus' kingdom is relational. Jesus takes the lowest on the social ladder, a child, and tells the community that the greatest are the lowest on the social ladder.



The equivalent today would be discovering the homeless, the retail workers, the poor and getting to know who they are. And elevating them.

What do we need to repent of so that we can put Jesus' Kingdom lens on? What will it take for you to change your mind and change your values to align with Jesus' kingdom?