

Introduction:

How often do you ask the Lord to search your heart and expose any evidence of pride? One of my friends from college left a lasting impact on my life as I observed the ways he was constantly searching for even the smallest trace of pride in his heart. He had many reasons to be prideful. He is arguably one of the most talented musicians I have ever been around, and his intellectual prowess equalled his musical skill, especially theologically. Yet, I will always remember his commitment to fight for humility and the grace God showed me through that. Church, pride is dangerous. James 4:6 says “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” We do not want God to be opposed to us. The problem with pride is how deceptive it is. Sometimes it presents itself in a clear boastful attitude of intellect and talents. Other times it is simply a propensity to argue and put the opinions of others down. It can exist in both self-preservation or self-promotion. It can even exist in self-deprecation. What’s worse is pride can even simply exist in the mind. Have you ever argued with someone in your mind? Chances are you always win that argument. Family, that is pride. Our pride is what often keeps us from loving others like Jesus calls us to love them. I believe we all have some kind of battle with pride and need the help of God’s Spirit to expose every evidence of it. And I wonder what it would be like if all of God’s people prioritized humility like my friend did. What if we learned the truth that the missionary David Brainerd understood, who once said, “It is sweet to be nothing and less than nothing that Christ may be all in all” (source unknown) (Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 193). Our passage today, in Mark 9:30-41, calls us to fight our pride and follow Christ in humility by highlighting another failure by the disciples surrounded by pointed teaching by Jesus. This passage can be broken up into three scenes. In the first scene, in verses 30-32, we see

Jesus Reminding the Disciples of His Approaching Sacrifice

The second passion prediction of Christ lays the foundation for the teaching that follows in verse 30-50 by highlighting a particular truth about His coming death. Look at verses 30-31, “They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 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.’” The detail of Jesus passing through Galilee is the final mention of Galilee until the night of His betrayal. Jesus’ desire to not want anyone to know He was passing through sets our focus in this section. Note the reason, because “he was teaching His disciples.” Interestingly, up to this point, we have heard of the astonishing nature of Jesus’ teaching but haven’t been given much of the content. The content of Jesus’ teaching now becomes the theme of this section, and the first teaching is this prediction of His coming sacrifice. Each passion prediction in Mark’s gospel follows a similar three-part structure. The Son of Man must suffer, he will be killed, and he will be resurrected after three days. Yet, each prediction has a unique focus. Look back at the first passion prediction in Mark 8:31, “And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.” In the first prediction, the focus is on the rejection of the Jewish religious council. In the third prediction, Jesus will detail the gruesome nature of His suffering, it taking place in Jerusalem, and His delivery over to the religious council, their condemnation, and His subsequent delivery by them to the Gentiles. In this second prediction, the shortest of the three, the focus is on, “The Son of Man” being “delivered into the hands of men.” This phrase is loaded with significance. The term for delivered can also mean “betrayed” or “handed over.” It is used by Mark twice to refer to Judas betraying Jesus, but also by Isaiah, Luke, and Paul to speak of God the Father delivering up His Son. Many believe this is what is called a divine passive, which references God’s name without using it, to convey God as the one delivering the Son of Man into the hands of men.

We can't be sure this is a divine passive, but from the testimony of Acts 2:23, we know that while Judas was completely active in his betrayal, Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." There is also an ironic play on words here where the Son of Man, shown to be sovereign over all in Daniel 7:13-14, is delivered into the hands of men, whom He is sovereign over. This opens our eyes an astounding reality in the death of Christ. In humility, the Son of Man was delivered into the hands of those He came to save. He was betrayed by Judas, yet he came to die for our sin according to the definite plan of God. He knew of His coming betrayal and sacrifice, yet never deterred from the plan. Church, this is the humble sacrifice we will think on later as we partake of communion together. And this humble sacrifice sets the foundation for the teaching that follows. Yet, notice the response of the disciples in verse 32, "But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him." The disciples fail to fully understand what Jesus says and its significance. Yet, note how Mark says they were afraid to ask Him about it. Was this because they were afraid to be rebuked like Peter was for not setting their minds on the things of God? Or because they understood enough to know that asking for clarity would lead to a probing of their hearts? Either way, we see their willful ignorance led to another failure in the next scene. Consider the second scene, in verses 33-34, where we see,

The Apostles Pridefully Arguing about Greatness

We are taken again to a private setting where Jesus often teaches the apostles things the crowds aren't privy to yet. Yet, this time, Jesus is the one asking the question. Look at verses 33-34, "And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest." When they arrive at the house in Capernaum, Jesus asks a piercing question, "What were you discussing on the way?" No one says a word because they are ashamed to tell him they were arguing about who was the greatest. James Edwards observes how their silence is just like the Pharisees after Jesus healed the man with a deformed man in chapter 3, revealing their hearts are no different than the Pharisees at this point (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 285-286). The content of their argument shows why the problem in their hearts, they wanted to know who was the greatest among them. Rabbinic writings commonly spoke of seating order in the kingdom of God. This may have caused them to wonder who would get the highest position of prominence, especially after Jesus mentioning His death again. With Jesus leaving, who would be the top dog. Their pride has kept them from seeing the truth about the kingdom of God, and Jesus will consistently teach from this point on about greatness in the kingdom not being a particular status but a life of service. It seems appropriate to check our own pride in response to this. Think back to the deception of pride at the beginning. Do we boast in our abilities? Do we put the understanding and opinions of others down? Are we always looking out for ourselves? Or seeking to promote ourselves? Do we consistently argue with others in our mind? Do these things keep us from loving others? Family, let Christ probe your heart this morning, breaking the hard soil of pride so you can receive the fresh soil of Jesus' teaching in the next scene. In the third scene, in verses 35-41, we see.

Jesus Showing how Humility is True Greatness

Mark has masterfully contrasted the humility of Jesus with the apostles' pride to bring us to the point of leaning into the instruction of Jesus. Look at how he draws our attention to the main point right away in verse 35, "And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.'" The opening of verse 35 is rather unique as we see Jesus sitting down and summing the twelve to Himself. The situation relays the concept of authoritative teaching. Then, we discover Jesus knew what they were discussing and teaches directly against it. Note how he appeals to their desire to be great saying, "if anyone would be first." Jesus doesn't rebuke the desire for greatness, He redefines it. Their desire for greatness isn't the problem, the problem is what they assumed greatness was.

He says true greatness is seeking to be last and a servant, effectively turning the world's idea of greatness on its head. Christ says true greatness is defined by lowliness and service. The Greek philosopher Plato once said, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?" (Plato, Gorgias 491e) (James R. Edwards, The Gospel according to Mark, 287). Plato's sentiment is sadly familiar. True service of others is not valued in our society; prominence, authority, and power are. And note the scope of these things. Jesus says, "last of all and servant of all." This isn't serving only those who are family and friends. It isn't only those you like and respect, or those who thank you for your service. It is everyone. And family, when we truly understand the humility of Jesus, we will humble ourselves and see this take shape in our lives. The disciples missed it because they were still striving for prominence and status. The goal of our passage is to keep us from doing the same. To drive this truth home, Mark homes in on humility through an object lesson by Jesus and a question by the apostle John, teaching us two practical things about humility. First, how

1) Humility Serves Even the Lowest for the Glory of God

Jesus understands the problem in their hearts goes deep, so He employs an object lesson to ensure they understand how far this servanthood goes. Notice the flow from verses 35-37. Look at verse 35 again, "And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.' And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.'" We can miss the point here by thinking Jesus is pointing to specific character traits of children, or focusing on the value of children. But the point he is making goes far deeper than that. The object lesson is built on the status of children in that society. This child would have represented the lowest person in social order, as one always under the authority and care of others. Children had no prominence in society. In taking the child into His arms, Jesus is identifying the "all" someone must become last of and servant of. All includes the lowest. And Jesus says receiving even the lowest means they receive Him, and God the Father as well. The term for "receive" relays more than simply welcoming someone. It carries the idea of treating them as significant, showing concern, care and kindness. Church, think on the significance of the point Jesus is making. He is saying, humble yourselves to be a servant of all, from children to adults, from the poor to the rich. Serve the outcast, the disabled, the foreigner, the addict, the homeless. The one who serves even the lowest by treating them as significant and showing true concern, care, and kindness, will be glorifying Jesus and the Father. Oh family, I hope you want to glorify our God and Saviors. If so, ask yourself if you are willing to serve all people? Humble yourselves and serve even the lowest. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." The second thing we are taught about humility is how,

2) Humility Prioritizes Christ's Glory over Personal Status

In the narrative flow, verses 38-41, continue the conversation between Jesus and the apostles. Look at verse 38, "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'" One of the most striking aspects of the gospels is how often the apostles, and especially the closest three, Peter, James, and John are portrayed in a less than ideal light. I think this is a mark of the authenticity in these records, because humans rarely like to expose our own faults. Here, the apostle John appears to possibly be boasting in their attempt to stop someone casting out demons in Jesus' name. Notice the reason, "because he was not following us." Note how John's focus was not on this person following Jesus, but on following the apostles. This moment echoes the story in Numbers 11:24-30 where Joshua tried to silence Eldad and Medad as they were prophesying in the camp, because they weren't part of the main group. In response, Moses proclaims, in verse 29, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" Joshua's concern was that they were undermining Moses, yet Moses knew it was bringing glory to God. John's concern is similar, "he is not part of us, so he should be silence."

The placement of this moment shouldn't be lost. In the narrative, this statement by John is interjected into Jesus' object lesson on humility. John still doesn't get it, and he reveals how the disciples are consistently fighting for their own privilege and exclusivity. Ironically, this comes right after they were unable to cast the demon out of the boy because of their lack of faith and prayer. Notice Jesus' response in verses 39-41, "But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.'" Jesus starts by emphatically telling them not to stop this person. Then He gives 3 compounding reasons. The first and main reason is how anyone doing a mighty work in Christ's name will not be able to speak evil of Jesus soon after operating in His power. Note how Jesus says the activity of this person is clearly happening "in my name." The point is Christ's name is being exalted through this and the priority of the disciples should always be first and foremost the glory of Jesus Christ. Church, His glory and the proclamation of His name is always more important than our status. The next reason includes them, showing how those who are not against them are actually for them because they are promoting the glory of Christ. Family, if our priority is the glory of Christ, then anyone proclaiming His name is for us. The final reason points back to the goal of humility in service of others. In verse 41, Christ makes an emphatically statement, saying "truly, I say to you." The statement shows how anyone who serves another because they belong to Christ will never lose their reward. In this reason, Christ both shows how to consider those who care for us as believers, and how to strive to serve the body of Christ. Jesus chooses one of the most simple and expected acts of hospitality of giving a cup of water to drink to show that service of those who belong to Christ, no matter how small it is, always receives a reward. This is the only time in Mark's gospel the language of reward appears, though we will hear echoes of it in chapter 10. Family, in highlighting the rewards coming to those who serve His people in such simple ways, He puts those rewards forward for our hearts to understand what comes to all who learn to become last of all and servants of all. Will you prioritize Christ's glory over your personal status? "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Conclusion:

This passage sets our minds on the call of following Christ in humility as we see Him point to His coming sacrifice, expose the apostles' foolish pride, and point them to the way of humility as true greatness. Next week, we will see following Christ also involves taking great care to not cause others to stumble and fight our own sin as this conversation continues in verses 42-50, but we need to think first deeply on the humility of Christ and His call to follow Him in that same humility. Today, we reflect on Christ's humility as we take communion together, in a physical act of remembering the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection before we take communion together, consider how the bread and cup point us to the humility of Christ. Our passage reminds us how the one who had His body be broken and blood be shed was the sovereign and powerful Son of Man, delivered into the hands of men by God for our sins. The one to whom belongs dominion, glory, and the kingdom laid down His life for us. This is the one, who as Philippians 2:6-8 says, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." We have a few songs prepared to set our hearts on these truths before taking communion together. During this time, think on the one who died for you. Remember the price He paid to secure your redemption. Confess your own pride and the ways you haven't followed Him in humility, trusting that His mercy covers all your sin. Let His love and grace flood your heart as you remember Him and have that love and grace lead you to be last of all and servant of all. If you don't know Christ, ask for His mercy today and receive salvation. Come and kneel before Him in humility, sit and reflect, or stand and sing. However the Lord leads you to respond, respond to His grace today.

Would you pray with me as we lean into His amazing grace?