

**Greatness According to Jesus**  
**Dr. Michael A. Cox**  
**Original: 5-12-24**

**Text:** Mark 9:33-37 (see also Matt. 18:1-5; Luke 9:46-48)

**Gospel of Mark:** [Bibliography](#) or [Manuscripts and Greek Exegesis](#)

**UBS 4<sup>th</sup> Edition Paragraph Topic:** Who Is the Greatest?

**Central Idea of Message:** Greatness according to Jesus requires self-sacrifice, self-denial, genuine humility, and service to others in Jesus' name.

**Introduction:** Episode 46. Ambition is not sinful, as long as it is accompanied by humility. This is a lesson the twelve disciples still needed to learn. Judas never learned it. Perhaps we need to learn this lesson as well, that is if we want to do better than Judas.

Here is what Jesus had to say about "greatness," and it is nothing like what most would imagine.

**I. The Foolishness of the Disciples (vv. 33-34)**

- A. Jesus and the disciples came to Capernaum (v. 33)
  - 1. Once inside the destination house
    - a) Capernaum had been his home base since Mark 2:1
    - b) Probably Peter's house
    - c) Jesus began to question the disciples
  - 2. "What were you discussing on the way?"
  - 3. As if he didn't know!
- B. The disciples did not answer Jesus' question but kept silent (v. 34)
  - 1. Mark tells us that they had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest, probably exacerbated by the inclusion of the select-three who went to the Mount of Transfiguration at the exclusion of the other nine
  - 2. No wonder they didn't answer Jesus!
    - a) They had been indulging their own egos!
      - (1) Who is going to be Vice-President?
      - (2) Who is going to be Secretary of State?
      - (3) Who is going to be Prime Minister?
      - (4) Who's #1?

- b) Perhaps there was now some embarrassment over even having such a discussion of each man's power ranking
- c) They were, undoubtedly, now ashamed of their arrogant discussion as to where each would fit in Jesus' kingdom in their contention for primacy
- d) Perhaps there have been times when we, too, have entertained elaborate thoughts or discussions about our own importance, self-seeking, and selfish ambition and we'd rather Jesus not have heard about it
- e) "The worldly standard declares: 'Work diligently to attain the topmost rung of the ladder of success. Never be satisfied until you are the most competent, or the richest, or the most famous in your field'" (Peterson 69)
- f) Busted [caught red-handed]!
- g) But now Jesus would tell them exactly which one of them was greatest, and each man inched to the edge of his seat!

## II. **Greatness According to Jesus (vv. 35-37)**

- A. "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all" (v. 35)
  - 1. "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all"
    - a) It seems natural to most of us to want to be first and go first!
    - b) "The way to be first is self-suppression and service" (Plummer 223)
    - c) He won't balk at picking up trash and cleaning toilets!
  - 2. "And servant of all"
    - a) Servant in activity
    - b) Same word as deacon
  - 3. The hearts of each of the Twelve must have sunk!
    - a) This didn't sound like much fun!
    - b) Where are the accolades?
    - c) Where is the applause?
    - d) Where are the groupies?
    - e) Where is the private jet?
    - f) Where is the tour bus?
    - g) Where are the endorsements?
    - h) Where is the wealth?

4. **This statement from Jesus was nothing short of revolutionary, because it is antithetical [opposite] to human instinct and to the cultural norm**
  5. **While a statement like this may look like it intends to turn the world upside down [it is revolutionary], it really shows that the world is upside down and Jesus wants to turn it right side up!**
- B. The example of receiving a child (vv. 36-37)
1. Jesus apparently had a child nearby, whom he picked up and set before the Twelve as he enacted his upcoming parable (v. 36)
  2. "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me" (v. 37)
    - a) "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me"
      - (1) Tender-hearted
      - (2) Unassuming
      - (3) Powerless
      - (4) Vulnerable
      - (5) Not ego centric: has no pride [yet]
      - (6) Knows nothing of worldly rank
      - (7) Not self-conscious
      - (8) Not self-sufficient, but dependent
      - (9) A teachable young mind ready to learn
      - (10) Welcomes God into their life
      - (11) **God wants all Christians to be "childlike but not childish" (Wiersbe, *Outlines*, 125)**
    - b) The parable Jesus enacted was intended to be an example of discipleship for the Twelve and for us, which is included in Jesus' measure of greatness
    - c) **"The child set in the midst by Jesus is the symbol of the truth that the final test of a society is what it does to children" (Luccock 788)**
      - (1) First thought: abortion [God help us!]
      - (2) Second thought: moral and spiritual education with example-setting
    - d) By application, thank God for those women and men who have been willing to take positions of service to children over the years in

nurseries, preschools, Sunday schools, Kids in Worship, elementary schools, and more!

3. "Whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me"
  - a) Note how the Father and the Son are equated here when it comes to receiving the Son
  - b) **To receive children with dignity and care is to receive people having a likeness to Jesus**
  - c) **Receiving people having a likeness to Jesus is to receive God the Father**

**Conclusion: Principles.**

(1) **Almost everybody can use a lesson in humility from time to time (v. 35).**

(2) **In the assessment of Jesus, true greatness is not what the world sees as great (v. 35).**

(3) **The world says greatness is when others serve us, whereas Jesus says that greatness is when we serve others (v. 35).**

(4) **Greatness in Christ's kingdom is not determined by office or popularity, but by service (v. 35).**

(5) **Position and power have long been viewed as highly desirable by almost everybody all over the world, regardless of nationality or culture, just as with the disciples, but Jesus made it evident that his ideal was that neither the Church, nor individual Christians, would ever operate on this premise (v. 35).**

(6) **Jesus did not condemn pursuit of greatness, he condemned pursuing it in worldly, selfish ways rather than by the path of childlike humility rendering service to others rather than lording over them (v. 35).**

(7) **Giving special moral, spiritual, and educational attention to children who are not even our own is a mark of greatness (v. 37).**

(8) **In Roman times, children were not valued and protected, so Jesus was saying that valuing even the seemingly least significant who can do nothing special for us is to value him and his Father (v. 37).**

(9) **"The disciples are to identify themselves with children and become 'the little ones who have no basis for pretensions to greatness'" (v. 37; Lane 340).**

(10) **Greatness according to Jesus requires self-sacrifice, self-denial, genuine humility, and service to others in Jesus' name!**