

A Servant of All -Mark 9:30-42

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please get in touch with Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church.]

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Mark 9:30...

Good customer service goes a long way. I don't know if this is true for you, but it certainly is for me. I'll go out of my way and drive further to a restaurant or establishment that I know has good service over driving right down the road for horrible customer service. The bad part about living in D.C. is that you can't escape lousy service! But my philosophy is that if I spend my hard-earned money on something, I'd like to not have to deal with rude employees.

Well, who's the king of excellent customer service? Chick-fil-A, of course. If you're having a bad day, the customer service experience is sure to brighten your mood. Last week, I was reading up on the practices of this company to get a grip on why they're so great at customer service. I stumbled across some interesting facts.

So, Chick-fil-A franchises are not for sale in a traditional way. Anyone aspiring to become a franchise owner must not only complete a thorough application, followed by several months of intense interviews, but they must also work at their restaurant once they're selected. The author of the article I read called this the "key to their success." The author goes on to say that this "is a huge differentiator as most fast food chains that have franchise owners own multiple locations and often hire underqualified managers to operate the restaurant." He then explains how this humble approach by the owner trickles down to the employees and creates an atmosphere of humble service. The franchise owner becomes a Chick-fil-A employee in his own store, cultivating a culture of humble and joyful service from the laborers.

Well, there's another owner who became a laborer. This isn't a Chick-fil-A franchise owner but rather an all-things-in-heaven and on-earth owner. The one that I speak of owns cattle on a thousand hills; in other words, it all belongs to him. This owner has no beginning or end because he's the alpha and omega. He's the one who was, is, and is

come come. And yet, this owner of all things took on human flesh and became a laborer on the very earth that he created. In other words, he humbled himself in a way that all human illustrations fall short. And now the result of the humility and humiliation of the Lord Jesus, God in the flesh, is that his servants have this humble attitude weaved into the very fabric of their being. That's the central point of the passage we'll consider this morning. How the gospel births humility in the believer. We'll consider this message in three questions:

1. What is the Gospel? (vv. 9:30-32)
2. Who is the Greatest? (vv. 9:33-37)
3. Why are they Gifted? (vv. 9:38-42)

Let's start by rereading verses 30-32. Here, we find the second explicit reference to the Lord Jesus' death and resurrection in the gospel of Mark. The first is in chapter 8, verse 31, after Peter correctly confesses Jesus as the Christ. And this was an entire thematic shift in the gospel of Mark. If you recall, I've mentioned in the past few weeks that the first eight chapters of Mark focus on Jesus' identity as King and his preaching of the kingdom. The final eight chapters shift from his identity to what he's seeking to accomplish as the king. In other words, Mark emphasizes the person of Christ in 1-8 and the work of Christ in 9-16. And we need a proper understanding of both to have a full-orbed grasp of the gospel. We considered this in detail a couple of weeks ago when we examined chapter 8 of Mark.

Now, I want you to notice the particular wording in verses 30b-31. The preaching of the Kingdom was clearly meant to be a public affair. That's how Mark describes it in the first chapter.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." -Mark 1:14-15

However, the explicit teaching of his death and resurrection was reserved for his disciples. This was Jesus' way of preparing them for the apostolic ministry, as they'd be responsible for taking this truth to the masses after his resurrection. Although they don't fully understand at the moment, which we'll touch on soon in the message, Jesus predicted that the Spirit would bring to their memory all of his teachings regarding his death and resurrection, IE, the gospel.

²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. -John 14:26

For example, Peter is clearly illuminated by the Spirit of God as he preached the first Christian sermon recorded in the book of Acts to the very people who demanded to have Jesus crucified.

²² “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— ²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. -Acts 2:22-24

So, this same apostle who was left scratching his head after Jesus explicitly taught his death and resurrection is now filled with the Spirit and is teaching the gospel of Jesus almost verbatim. Again, this doesn't happen without Jesus laying the groundwork of teaching in this text and the Spirit of God subsequently opening his eyes. And the wording of verse 31 alludes to a consistent teaching on his death and resurrection.

So, we find the progression of God's divine timetable and plan as we consider Jesus and his commissioned apostles. In Jesus' ministry, the kingdom of God is foregrounded while the cross of Christ is backgrounded. And yet, after the resurrection of Christ, there's a reversal of sorts. The cross of Christ becomes foregrounded, while the kingdom is backgrounded.

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. -Luke 24:45-47

So, today, we rightly preach Christ! That's the message! That's the central focus. And we consider the kingdom in light of what he's accomplished. And what has he accomplished? Let's reread verse 31.

It's imperative that we understand who ultimately delivered Jesus into the hands of men to be killed. In other words, who's ultimately responsible for the death of Jesus? There are several ways you can answer this question and be technically correct. However, one answer is the foundation or buttress to the rest. You may say Judas is responsible for the death of Jesus, and you'd be correct. You may say the Jewish populace is the reason for the death of Jesus, and you'd be correct. You may say Rome is responsible for the death of Jesus, and you'd be correct. Or you may supersede these answers by saying we're ultimately responsible for the death of Jesus, and you'd be partially correct. However, the one ultimately responsible for delivering Jesus to the cross is God the

Father. To put it more bluntly, God killed Jesus. “But why would a loving Father kill his own Son?” So that he wouldn’t have to slaughter for eternity all those who would believe.

Perhaps you're familiar with Jesus saying, “Let this cup pass if possible.” What’s the cup that he’s referring to? Well, the Old Testament tells us.

¹⁵ Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.¹⁶ They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.” ¹⁷ So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it... -Jeremiah 25:15-17

For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs. -Psalm 75:8

So, this cup is filled with God’s wrath. And our sins fill this cup up. And God the Father made his Son drink of the wrath on behalf of all who would believe. This is the gospel that Jesus is teaching his disciples, at least in its infant form. Nevertheless, their partial blindness persists in verse 32. They didn’t learn from the picture of resurrection on display last week with the boy healed from his demon. And they’re not learning from the explicit teaching of the Lord Jesus. I’m sure they could have parroted Jesus’ words; they did have ears. However, they hadn’t come to a true understanding of the gospel and the cross.

How about you this morning? Have you come to a proper understanding of the cross? Are you gripped by the fact that your sin will be paid for in either of two ways? By Jesus on the cross or by you in hell. Like the disciples, on your own, you can’t understand this. That’s why Luke 24 said he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and then we find Peter preaching with clarity in Acts 2. Hear what Paul says to the church at Corinth:

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. -1 Corinthians 2:14

If you haven’t, I implore you to cry out to God and ask him to reveal these truths to you so you can respond with faith and repentance. And believer, this is for you as well. Can you parrot the facts of the gospel without a deep knowledge of it? In other words, how does the gospel impact the way you treat your spouse? How does it affect how you treat your kids, your fellow church members, your coworkers, or even your enemy? Your

understanding of the gospel, or lack thereof, will surely inform these areas of your life. Don't be a positional post-resurrection disciple and a functional pre-cross disciple.

Your understanding of the gospel should also impact how you view greatness, bringing us to our second point. The gospel should fuel our humility and service. However, we get the antithesis from the disciples in this text. And we would do well to learn from their error. Let's consider our second point this morning by rereading 33-34.

So, what's the disciples' response to the news that their savior will soon be delivered to the hands of men to be killed and resurrected? An argument over who's the greatest disciple? Let that sink in. Not in a judgmental way, as I'm sure we would be no better off in their position. It's more of an indictment of humanity as a whole. Now, to be fair, they didn't quite understand what Jesus was teaching; however, instead of seeking an answer, they have this argument. And they know they're in the wrong because they wouldn't answer Jesus when he asked what they were discussing. It's almost childlike. I've lost count of the times I've told one of my daughters that I'm hurting or something, only for them to react by asking if they can have a new toy or something. This is what the Lord Jesus has to deal with. But he deals with them so gently and patiently.

You see, the disciples misunderstand how Jesus' death revolutionizes the essence of leadership. They're still thinking in worldly categories. Because they didn't understand that Jesus' messiahship was essentially him being a servant. Jesus describes this in chapter 10 when he tells them that the Son of Man didn't come to be served but to serve others. They assumed their unique role involved lordship and mastery over others. But they soon discover the implications of Jesus' death with respect to their roles.

In Jesus' response, he doesn't repudiate greatness; he merely redefines it. "If you want to be first or great, amen! But make sure your definition of first or greatness aligns with the kingdom's countercultural definition." That's his answer in verse 35. In his commentary, German New Testament scholar A. Schlatter describes how radical this idea from Jesus was. "At all points in worship, in the administration of justice, at meals, in all dealings, there constantly arose the question of who was greater, and estimating the honor due to each was a task which had constantly to be fulfilled and was felt to be very important." In other words, precedence was a cultural preoccupation. But the Lord Jesus comes and flips the script. This is in line with many of Jesus' ethics, which reverses the natural disposition of humanity upside down. Similar to the command to love your enemies. In Michael Jordan's 23-minute Hall of Fame speech, he named people who helped him become great because they were obstacles for him to

overcome. Jordan defined greatness as tearing others down while elevating himself. And this is natural for us.

We fail to view others as image bearers but rather as avatars that serve their purpose of making us look and feel great. But consider the teaching and life of the Lord Jesus. In John 13, the Incarnate God took on the slave role by washing the disciple's feet, and then he instructs them:

¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. —John 13:14-16

Jesus commands the disciples to serve one another, which kind of gets us to verse 37. There are various views on what Jesus means by this saying. At first, it's somewhat of a head-scratcher because this example seems to involve receiving the humble, whereas the context is concerned with being humble. The child serves as an example of the most needy within the Christian community. So, I don't think the point is a broader teaching of serving the vulnerable in general, although the Bible also speaks to this. Here, Jesus is concerned with his disciples welcoming and serving the most socially unimportant person in the believing community, such as a child. Here are a few reasons for that understanding.

First, the phrase "receives one such child" suggests that the illustration doesn't refer to an abstract understanding of a child as a metaphor but to an actual child. Second, we find the theme of accepting and rejecting believers later in this passage as a parallel in verse 41. And lastly, the "little ones" in verse 42 clearly refer to believing children, which serves as a bridge from this passage. Children in the ancient world were not prized as they are in our day. It would be unheard of for a child to be a story's hero or main character, as they are in many of our books and movies. They weren't examples of innocence and purity. They were at the bottom of the social ladder. And even in Judaism, little children were viewed as "weak" due to their inability to keep the law like adults. James touches on a similar subject in his epistle.

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in,³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet,"⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? -James 2:1-4

In other words, it's sort of easy to receive and serve the prestigious within the Christian community. But can you do the same for that person who doesn't have the status or the ability to exalt you in any sense? Ask yourself, who is like the child for you? Perhaps it's believing children that you think you're above serving. Or perhaps, to James' point, it's the poorer brother or sister.

To sum this section up, when the disciples receive or serve a socially unimportant person in the believing community, such as a child, they serve and receive Jesus himself. Here are two reasons that's true. Firstly, that believer is following the footsteps of Jesus, which serves as the overall lesson of humility.

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. -Phil 2:5-11

Secondly, how we treat other believers is how we treat Jesus. Let me say that again: how we treat other believers is how we treat Jesus. Consider again what Jesus is saying in verse 37. This is consistent with the New Testament's understanding of Jesus identifying with his people.

⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. -Acts 9:4-5

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,^[1] you did it to me.' -Matthew 25:37-40

²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. -1 John 4:20

So, how have you been treating Jesus lately? I wonder how a true understanding of this New Testament concept would change how we treat one another. Would we be so quick to gossip about one another if we understood we were gossiping about Jesus? Would we so comfortably assume the worst about our brothers and sisters? Would we tear each other down with our words? How should our understanding that our treatment of one another is how we're treating Jesus impact our lives? This is a good question to discuss over lunch.

Now to our final point in verses 38-42. "Why are they Gifted? So this verse consists of three parts: (1) the incident of the exorcisms, (2) a saying concerning a drink of water, and (3) a warning against causing Christians to stumble. So, let's start with the first. As we read, John reports to the Lord Jesus that you tried stopping people from successfully casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and he gets rebuked for it. This story bears a striking resemblance to what we find in Numbers 11. This is what Joshua tells Moses after he sees two men prophesying by the Spirit:

²⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." ²⁹ But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"
-Numbers 11:28-29

Jesus' response is similar to that of Moses. Now, there's some irony in this passage. First off, Jesus just got through teaching them to receive people "in my name." And while those words are still hanging in the air, these disciples are complaining about others casting out demons "in his name!" There's more irony because the disciples had just failed to cast out a demon while these individuals were successful. As R.T. France stated, "To see an 'outsider' apparently succeeding where they, the chosen agents of Jesus, have failed is doubly distressing." But the Lord Jesus explains to John that what these men are doing is good. Perhaps this pericope is what inspired Paul to write what he did in 1 Corinthians:

³ Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. -1 Corinthians 12:3

Notice how, in verse 40, Jesus redefines "us" beyond the scope of these twelve disciples. They're so busy arguing over who's the greatest that they only draw the circle of insiders around themselves. However, Jesus draws the circle much broader. I think the fundamental truth that Jesus seeks to teach is this: in this spiritual war, there are two kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. There are only those two,

and everyone is on one or the other. Our adversary is not other disciples. Our adversary is the devil and his demons that are against us. The pride of the disciples has led them to a cutthroat type of competition that draws really small circles based on who's part of their group. And since then, Christians have been guilty of the same. Consider the relevant words of J.C. Ryle on this passage.

“Here is a golden rule indeed, and one that human nature sorely needs and has too often forgotten. Members of all branches of Christ's church are apt too often forgotten. Members of all branches of Christ's church are apt to think that no good can be done in the world unless it is done by their own party and denomination. They are so narrow-minded that they cannot conscience the possibility of working on any other pattern but that which they follow...Christians have repeatedly persecuted Christians for no better reason than that which is here given by John. They have practically proclaimed to their brothers and sisters, ‘You must either follow us or not work for Christ at all.’”

As Ryle has stated, sadly, professing Christians have persecuted other professing Christians over secondary matters. Here's an alarming statistic for you. According to some accounts, there were more Anabaptist martyrs in the sixteenth century than Christian martyrs in the first three centuries of the church prior to the alleged conversion of Constantine. That's insane if true! Now, I don't think any of us would take it this far, but this sectarian spirit is still alive and well in us if we view other denominations with the “us” and “them” categories.

So when talk about serving and receiving Christ, that includes Christians of other denominations and elk. As Kent Hughes would say, “The criterion for ministry is not style or tradition or denomination, but Jesus' name being lifted up and glorified. We are to rejoice in this.”

The second part of this text is verse 41. This connects with verse 37. Again, treating other Christians well is equated to treating Christ well. And I'm sure there are implications regarding churches meeting the needs of itinerant missionaries and full-time pastors as well. There's a reward connected to funding the gospel ministry in these ways. Verse 41 also works as a bridge from verse 37 to verse 42. Just as there's great reward in receiving and providing for Christians in previous passages, there's grave danger in causing young believers to sin, which is all the more reason why we should embrace them and serve them. Here, Jesus instructs believers not to be temptations to others. Next week, we'll consider how to deal with our own inward temptations. Let's pray.