



# THE PATH TO GREATNESS

Catalog No. 1127

Mark 9:30-50

26th Message

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June 27th, 1999

Over the past 15 months, *Time* magazine has published the first four in a series of five special editions chronicling whom they regard as the top one hundred “great men and women who with their lives wrote the history of our times,”<sup>1</sup> the century’s most influential “Leaders and Revolutionaries, Artists and Entertainers, Builders and Titans, Scientists and Thinkers, and Heroes and Inspirations.” Later this year they will announce their “Person of the Century.” I am curious as to who they consider great, and by what measure they determine that. Almost all of the eighty individuals identified up to this point have achieved what the magazine considers greatness by moving up the ladder of success through aggressively challenging and defeating their competition. Greatness, it seems, is often measured by the number of casualties left in people’s wake on their way to the top.

In our text from the gospel of Mark this morning, Jesus reminds us that greatness in the kingdom of God is measured quite differently, however. Last week, we looked at the encounter between Jesus and the father of a demon-possessed boy. This was an instructive lesson for the disciples on how they needed to live in utter dependence upon their Heavenly Father. We saw that a Christian’s power and strength comes from God alone, and that faith to receive and act on that power is nurtured through a lifestyle of prayer.

In chapter 9 of Mark’s account we will see in graphic terms what the attitude and responsibilities of a follower of Christ should be, and learn with the disciples the path to *true* greatness.

## A. Loving the lowly (9:30-37)

**And from there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He was unwilling for anyone to know about it. For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be delivered up into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise again three days later.” But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him. (Mark 9:30-32, NASB)**

Following several busy days in the north, Jesus now turns south from Caesarea and heads back toward Capernaum, along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Mark stresses that Jesus is seeking to avoid public attention. He wants to set aside time for the private instruction of his closest followers, to prepare them for what lies ahead and teach them how radically new life in God’s kingdom truly is. Foremost on his heart is communicating to the twelve what his fate will be as the Son of Man. This is the second time Jesus shares about the events that will soon unfold, but for the first time he says he will be “delivered” into the “hands of men.” Mark records that the disciples did not

understand what he said and they were afraid to inquire further.

All of this was difficult for them to grasp. They must have pondered who would betray Jesus, and why would men go so far as to kill him? And surely they must have wondered that if he were killed, and rose from the dead in a show of power and strength three days later, then what? They were afraid to explore these things further with him, but as they traveled they began arguing with one another over the implications for them of such a prediction. Verse 33:

**And they came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. (9:33-34)**

Mark does not say how the argument developed, but we can imagine their discussion went something like this: “If Jesus is going to die and rise again, and rule a new kingdom with power as the Son of Man, then who will be his right-hand man? Who will be his most trusted advisor and how will he rank the other eleven? Who will be first and who will be last? Which of us will Jesus choose as the greatest?”

Following their arrival at a home in Capernaum, likely the residence of Peter and Andrew (1:29), Jesus continues the process of instructing them by asking the question, “*What were you discussing on the way?*” They knew the discussion was inappropriate, and in their embarrassment they remain silent in the face of Jesus’ inquiry. But even though they did not answer him, he knew what they were talking about. Now he goes on to address the very issue that was burning in their hearts and minds. Verse 35:

**And sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.” And taking a child, He stood him in the midst of them; and taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever receives one child like this in My name is receiving Me; and whoever receives Me is not receiving Me, but Him who sent Me.” (9:35-37)**

Showing great patience, and taking the customary posture of a rabbi instructing his pupils, Jesus sits down and gathers the twelve around him. He tells them once again that the way of the kingdom of God is different from what they expect: “*If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.*” What he said was completely counter-cultural. The disciples were looking to establish a hierarchy in their midst, like that of their contemporary culture where titles and rank meant everything. The more people who served you and catered to your needs, the greater your status within the community. But Jesus says that in order to be first, one must become the servant of all. Great-

ness is not measured by how many serve you, but by how many you serve.

The path to greatness in the kingdom of God is not paved at the expense of others. It is not attained through coercive power or a domineering attitude that makes people feel weak and small. Greatness is achieved through a spirit of love and service, building others up and seeing them as more important than yourself (Phil 2:3). Jesus is not saying there is anything wrong with a Christian holding a leadership position, but that a Christian in a position of authority ought to reflect an attitude of humility and a desire to serve and strengthen others.

To reinforce this lesson, Jesus lovingly embraces a little child, and says, *“Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.”* Children occupied the lowest place in the Greco-Roman world. They were ignored and abused because they were without rights, influence, wealth or power. By embracing this child, Jesus has symbolically taken the position of receiving and welcoming him. Jesus, the first and greatest, here makes himself the last and lowest by submitting himself to serving and loving the lowest of the low, a child.

Now from this point on the disciples did not drop everything and minister exclusively to children. They understood that a child represented those who are not highly esteemed, who are needy and are easily ignored and neglected without anyone knowing or protesting. The parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31-46) reveals the kind of people Jesus was talking about: the poor (those who are hungry, thirsty and naked), the stranger, the sick, the incarcerated. In addition to these, who are the lowly of our day? Who are those whom no one seems to care for, the insignificant in the eyes of the world? The aged and the physically and mentally handicapped, certainly. Many around us are in desperate need of our love and compassion. These are the kind of people Jesus identifies with, and it is these whom he instructs us not to turn our backs on. He says we are to welcome them, receive them, and treat them with the same kind of generosity, love and respect that we would show to him and his Heavenly Father.

In her book, *Words to Love By*, Mother Teresa related how she put this truth into practice:

I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one. You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, ‘Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.’ So you begin...I begin. I picked up one person—maybe if I didn’t pick up that one person I wouldn’t have picked up 42,000. The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn’t put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less. Same thing for you, same thing in your family, your community, your work, your school, your church—just begin...one, one, one.<sup>2</sup>

I saw this kind of radical love in action just this past week when my wife Amy and I had the privilege of hosting a Backyard Bible Club for young children. I was very impressed by the work of love our junior high and high school students invested in the lives of these children, teaching them Bible stories and memory verses and playing and praying with them. The little ones are sometimes

rude and disobedient, but our teenagers kept giving. They were not doing it for money or special perks; they were simply taking these words of Jesus to heart, lovingly serving the lowly in his name, changing the world one child at a time.

This notion of receiving the lowly in Jesus’ name reminds John of a man who was casting out demons in the Lord’s name but was not one of the twelve disciples.

## B. Judging our hearts (9:38-48)

**John said to Him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to hinder him because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not hinder him, for there is no one who shall perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is for us. (9:38-40)**

A certain man, unlike the disciples in a recent episode, was actually able to cast out demons in the name of Christ, but because he was not one of the band of disciples, they tried to hinder him. It seems as though they felt they were the only ones “authorized” and blessed to minister in Jesus’ name. This attitude of exclusivity comes in many forms: pride, envy, selfishness, intolerance. I came across this poem which reflects these feelings:

Believe as I believe, no more, no less  
That I am right, and no one else confess.  
Feel as I feel, think as I think,  
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink,  
Look as I look, do always as I do,  
Then and only then, I’ll fellowship with you.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus corrects this and declares that no man could do a mighty work in his name and be his enemy. Just because the disciples had not heard of this man and knew nothing of his background or training was not grounds to disqualify him from ministering to others in the name of Jesus. The casting out of demons was done by God’s power, and that power was not limited to the twelve. Did the disciples think using Jesus’ name was a magical formula that would bring success to anyone who called upon it? Jesus makes the point that people can do miracles in his name only if they are in a proper relationship with him. They could not in one moment believe in him and do a miracle in his name and at the next turn against him and vilify him. Thus Jesus lays down for his disciples the great principle: *“He who is not against us is for us.”* He opposed the disciples’ attitude of exclusivity with an open and generous spirit.

This text is a warning to us that we are not to alienate others or be quick to judge them simply because they go to a different church or worship in a different way from us. If they glorify the name of Jesus, and enter the battle against Satan and his demons, then they are our brothers and sisters. We need to recognize who our real enemy is. Our battle is not against the liberals, the charismatics, the Baptists, the Presbyterians or the Catholics, but against Satan. We are at war against him for the lives of unbelievers. Shame on us if we waste our energies battling one another.

To help his disciples discern who it is that is “for them” and who it is that is “against them,” Jesus paints two vivid pictures. Verses 41-42:

**For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you,**

**he shall not lose his reward. And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.”**

The first picture is that of a man who notices that the disciples are weary and parched from a long and hard journey. He sees their need and recognizes them as Christ's followers and, being willing to identify himself with them and their Master, receives them and offers refreshment along the way. According to Jesus, even such a small act as this is evidence that that man is for us. It is not the expense involved or the size of the gift that matters; it is the motivation of the heart of the giver that makes the difference. This man gives the water because he wants to help in the cause of Christ.

On my office wall I have pinned a few hand-made notes of encouragement and faith that have ministered to my parched soul in the past. On Valentine's Day, I got a card that says on the outside, "*Jesus Loves Me*" and "*Love one Another.*" On the inside it says, "*Dear Andy, Have a happy Valentine's Day. I think you are a great Pastor. Andrew Gatley.*" Another card I received during my week ministering in Mexico read:

Dear Andy, As a little girl living in a very small town in Pennsylvania, a team of young people from a Bible College came to our church. They sang "His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me." I sang it over and over, it meant so much to me, still does. Thinking of Elizabeth Elliot's prayer, she says it beautifully—'Father, you've given us all things good and we thank you from our hearts. Follow the Shepherd. He knows the way—I will fear no evil for Thou are with me. That's His promise.' I have your picture on my refrigerator door so I won't forget to pray for you every day, Andy. Your responsibility is great. God knows your needs. And 'He will supply all your needs according to His riches' (Phil. 4:19). Telling the Mexican children of Jesus' love and how they can live for Jesus is one of the most important things you can do. Thank you for doing it for us back in Sunnyvale. Love you. Marge Sterling.

And just this past week, knowing how preoccupied we've been hosting a Backyard Bible Club, three families from this body provided meals for our family. All these gestures mean so much. They refresh and strengthen us for ministry. May we all be on the lookout for those ministering in Jesus' name who are in need of a word of encouragement or an act of kindness to refresh their spirits. Those who have so richly blessed us will receive their reward in full.

The second picture painted for the disciples is that of man who is "against" them and their ministry to the lowly. Instead of tenderly caring for a person in need, and encouraging him to walk in the way of the Lord either by his actions or neglect, he causes one who is easily influenced to fall into sin. This kind of man will not go unrewarded either. For him is reserved the harsh judgment: "*it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.*" This kind of death would be better than causing another to fall into sin. Matthew and Luke put it this way: Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come (Matt 18:7; Luke 17:1).

Jesus has told his disciples that whether a person is "for

them" or "against them" is not determined by his membership in the twelve, it is evident by the fruit of his heart. Is he encouraging the lowly and building them up in their walk with God or is he causing them to fall down in their faith and leading them into sin? The apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary" (Gal 6:7-9).

Halfway into his discourse, Jesus turns the tables on his disciples and tells them that they must examine the fruit of their hearts, too. What is true for others is also true for them. They too will reap what they sow, whether for good or evil. Verses 43-49:

**And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell (Gehenna), into the unquenchable fire, [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than having your two feet, to be cast into hell (Gehenna), [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched]. And if your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hell (Gehenna), where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire."**

Jesus sets two clear alternatives before the disciples. One is called "life," or "the kingdom of God," and the other is called "hell," or "Gehenna." Gehenna was a valley located just outside of Jerusalem that was used as a garbage dump. There refuse was burned and the bodies of executed criminals were discarded. Fires smoldered there continuously and worms crawled through the garbage. It was a repulsive, ugly and foul place which came to symbolize a place of eternal waste—the fate of those who rebelled against God.

The violent images of cutting off hands and feet and tearing out eyes are shocking. That is exactly what Jesus has in mind. Seeking to impress the seriousness of this matter indelibly upon the hearts of the disciples, he uses startling metaphors to show that enjoying life in the kingdom of God is worth the most costly sacrifice.

I do not believe Jesus is speaking literally, because even if we were to cut off a hand or foot or pluck out an eye we would still have the other one left. Besides, these are not the source of our sin anyway. Our body parts do not act independently of our will. It is our heart that is the center and source of our sin. Jesus is not calling for physical mutilation of the body but for spiritual surgery of our heart and soul.

We must deal drastically with sin, which is to the inner soul what a cancerous tumor is to the body: it spreads, and if it is left unchecked it will eventually cause death. Halfway measures will not do. Whatever in our lives perverts our hearts and leads us into sin must be removed promptly and decisively, just as a surgeon would amputate a hand or a foot to save a life.

These images of the hand, foot and eye encompass the totality of life. They help us think through the areas of our life where we must deal decisively with sin. Here are some questions we face. With regard to our feet, are there places or events we go to that lead us into sin? With regard to our hands, are we engaging in any activities or habits that are in direct disobedience to the will of God? And how about our eyes? What are we reading or watching that lead us into temptation?

### **C. Submitting to the fiery trials of purification (9:49-50)**

Jesus is telling the disciples that the road to greatness involves not only loving the lowly, and not only examining and judging themselves, it also involves submitting to the fiery trials they will soon face for the purpose of purification. Look at what he says. Verse 49:

**“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” (9:49-50)**

It's tempting to compromise with the world and become adulterated with its priorities and values. When that happens, we lose our saltiness, our effectiveness as agents of change in our crooked and perverse generation. Fiery trials will be sprinkled throughout our lives. If we humbly submit to them before the Lord, they will do their work in us, burning off the impurities of our hearts and revealing the glory of Christ. The apostle Peter expressed the same idea when he wrote: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Pet 4:12-13).

I believe that what Jesus is telling his disciples here in very serious terms is not that they can lose their salvation, but that if they choose to live contrary to the way of the kingdom that he is setting forth, then their lives will be wasted. If they do not judge themselves, and submit to the fiery trials of purification, rejecting the ways and thinking of the world, then they will be like salt that has lost its saltiness. If they continue to quarrel and compete against one another instead of serving the lowly and being at peace with one another, then they will no longer be able to season and preserve life in their decaying world.

Ken Gire in his book *The Reflective Life*, writes: “Most of us, I think, genuinely want humility. But who of us is willing to be humiliated in order to get it? We are told in the Scriptures that God gives grace...people who have been brought low and humbled (James 4:6). If that is true, then whatever happens in our lives to humble us is, in the long run, a good thing, because it paves the road over which the grace of God comes to us.”

It is by that grace that we are able to love the lowly, judge ourselves, and submit to times of persecution and testing. By his grace these produce within us a genuine humility and servant heart that allows us to be at peace with one another.

Who will *Time* magazine choose as the greatest person of the 20th century? Based on this passage from Mark's gospel, who would you choose? Who has given his or her life to loving the lowly? Who has severely judged the sin in his or her life? Who has submitted humbly to the fiery trials of life? I can think of some in our body whom I would vote for, but none of them made the magazine's list of 100. I believe the only individual on that list that comes close to exhibiting the kind of greatness we have discussed this morning is Mother Teresa. Asked why she sacrificed everything to serve the lowest of the low in the slums of Calcutta, she said, “*Because I see in their face the face of Jesus. I do what I do because I love Jesus; we do it for Jesus, to Jesus, and with Jesus.*”

It is appropriate that we celebrate communion after reflecting on this text, because it is only through the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf that we know what true greatness is. The apostle Paul wrote these words to the Philippians:

**Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Phil 2:3-11)**

Jesus lived and modeled the radical life of a servant, loving the lowly even unto death itself. It is only by His Spirit working within us that we are able to love and serve in this way.

As the bread is being passed, I encourage you to go before your loving Heavenly Father and examine your heart, confessing before him the areas of sin in your life.

*The Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” (1 Cor 11:23-25)*

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1. Norman Pearlstine, Editor-In-Chief of *Time* magazine, April 13, 1998.

2. Mother Teresa, *Words to Love By* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1989) 7, 79.

3. From a sermon by J. David, *Servant Ministry*, on Mark 9:30-40.