

# Mark - a Lesson in Greatness

by J. Glyn Owen

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*Jesus teaches that true greatness in the Christian sense involves becoming the servant of all and being willing to die to oneself.*

**Duration:** 34:52

**Scripture:** Matthew 20:26-28, Mark 9:33-35, Mark 9:38-40, Luke 22:24-27, John 13:14-15, Philippians 2:3-4

**Topics:** "Greatness"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of humility and servanthood in the Christian faith. Jesus teaches that in order to be first or great, one must be willing to be the last and servant of all. The speaker highlights the significance of Jesus stopping and sitting down to teach this lesson, indicating its strategic importance. The story of John recognizing a man casting out demons in Jesus' name, but wanting to stop him because he wasn't part of their group, serves as an example of the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus' teachings on servanthood. The speaker concludes by expressing gratitude for the opportunity to serve among the congregation and acknowledging their easy nature to serve.

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## Transcript

Now, the subject of the disciples' conversation is evident to all of us on first reading. You have it there quite clearly in verses 33 to 34. Jesus had heard something going on as they walked toward Capernaum.

Indeed, he had heard everything. He had overheard everything, though they did not realize the fact that he could hear so well. Our Lord has a wonderful hearing.

And he'd overheard everything. But nevertheless, when they got into the house, he asked them, what were you talking, what were you arguing about? And a strange silence came over the community because they had been arguing about, of all questions, which of them was the greatest. Now, were it not for the sheer candor of Holy Scripture, we would never have had this record.

I hope we realize that. If the disciples were ashamed to own up to the subject of their argumentation en route to Capernaum, they certainly would not have voluntarily written down this kind of thing about themselves. For the real author of Scripture is neither Matthew, Mark, Luke, nor John, together with the others.

The real author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit of God. And he is the spirit of truth as well as of wisdom. And he wanted the truth to be written for his glory and for our profit.

And for that reason, we have this record, written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, indicating the fact that God really wants us to get the message. I shall now avoid the considerable temptation to attempt to explain how it was and why the disciples could be addressing themselves to such a question as this, especially at this time. I simply note the fact, when Jesus was evidently composing his own soul, if that's the right way of putting it, in one sense he had never been discomposed.

In another sense, he did show an immense concern, and he said that he was straightened because he had a cup from which he had to drink. And he was straightened, as if in a straitjacket, until there had been done. And he was telling them of the fact that he, their Lord, was on his way to Jerusalem, soon to be killed, murdered by the hands of lawless men, and to die for them.

And at the same time, they, for their part, are arguing and bickering concerning this, which of us is the greatest. Here is the incarnate Lord himself, God incarnate, the Prince of glory, living like a man among men, going to his cross, and they're talking, which of us is the greatest. Well, now, that in simplicity, that in essence, is the subject.

What I want to pause with particularly this morning is the substance of the lesson that Jesus taught. Taught the disciples when they've got into the house and apart, and he asks them, as we've indicated, what were you talking about, by the way? Well, they didn't answer. Well, he went on to reply to their question anyway, because he knew what it was all about.

We read in verse 35, sitting down, Jesus called the 12 and said, if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, the servant of all. Now, it needs to be noted, I think, that in sitting down, Jesus was meaning to place tremendous stress upon what he was going to say. He was preparing them for something significant.

Often times, he did this by the use of the term, amen, amen, which we translate verily, verily. He prepared them for something of real significance, something they should attend to with all their beings. At other times, he stopped walking about, he just sat down.

Now, the normal mode of teaching was, of course, they taught as they walked. But here, there was something that was so strategically important, it must be got across, and everyone must get the lesson. So Jesus stops, and he sits down, and he gathers them around him, and he says, now listen to me.

I'm only bringing this out because I want to get the point across that our Lord was very concerned that this point be understood. And insofar as it is also recorded by two other of the Synoptic Gospels, I'm quite sure it is important for me to get it, and for you to get it this morning. May the Lord enable us to get it.

At the end of Mark 8, we have the record of how Jesus followed the clear revelation of his own pending rejection and death with the equally unambiguous statement that he was going to die. And then after that, he went on to say to the disciples that if any one of them meant to be his followers, meant to follow him, that person likewise must deny himself and take up his own cross and follow me. And then Jesus goes on and adds to that, he that would save his life must lose it.

Now, have we got that? Jesus says, I'm going to die. Then he adds to that, not only am I going to die, but if you are going to be my followers, my disciples at all, you've got to die. And involved in the death that you

are going to die is this, you cannot cling to your life as it now is in its natural state, you'll have to give it up, you'll have to surrender it, and you'll have to be crucified in a sense, just as I have to be crucified in another sense.

Jesus now takes up this selfish concern for greatness, and he explains in the plainest possible language what taking up the cross and denying oneself really means. And I have to warn you that this is not an easy passage to preach, nor to listen to, because it's got something to say to you and to me that's really going to hurt us. And if you're not prepared to listen well now, you'd better switch off.

If you're not prepared for the challenge, you might as well switch off. You go to doze, have a little doze. Now, there are three things I want to say here briefly.

Let's start with the superficial, but the superficial is startling enough. Becoming the first or the greatest is a very costly matter. Jesus starts there.

If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and servant of all. Now, the least, the most superficial factor to emerge from those words is this. Jesus is saying that to be the greatest is going to cost.

Now, taking those words in their total context, we could say, yes, it's going to cost God, and it's going to cost the candidate for godliness. In order to make anybody great who has been spoiled by sin, as we all have been, it costs the Almighty God the sending forth of His only begotten Son, the message of Christmas, the Incarnation, the death of Christ upon the cross, and His resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand, but especially His sorrows and sufferings and sin-bearing anguish upon the cross. It costs God to make a sinner great in any sense.

That's in the background here. But in the foreground is this other thing. It's not simply going to cost God.

It has cost Him. It's going to cost you. It's going to cost me.

And what Jesus now stresses is the cost of such greatness to the person who seeks it. And His unequivocal teaching is that you simply cannot become great in the Christian sense without first deciding to become the very last, and along with that deciding to be the servant of the very least in your society. You cannot become the greatest without deliberately choosing, and by the grace of God, becoming a man or a woman who looks upon yourself as deserving the last place in the queue and the least place in society, the servant of all.

I told you this is not an easy passage. There is no route to the throne, says Jesus, the throne of splendor, save via the cross of shame and humiliation for the disciple as well as his master. Greatness is profoundly costly.

It means that you take a position in life that corresponds to the verdict of the cross upon you and upon me. What is the verdict of the cross upon me? What is the verdict of the cross of Christ upon you? Will you kindly receive it this morning? The verdict of the cross is that you deserve death and I deserve death. The verdict of the cross is this, that the old nature that is in you and in me can't be patched up.

It won't do to send it to the university for a couple of years, not even 10-12 years, to be patched up with philosophy and a little bit of knowledge of science and of the arts. It won't do that way. That's not deep enough.

It's not radical enough. The verdict of the cross is this, that old nature in you and in me has got to die. It's got to be crucified.

It's got to be mortified. John the Baptist put it beautifully, though he wasn't referring to this, but he used an image which exhibits or rather which elucidates this very beautifully. He said about the Lord Jesus, He must increase, I must decrease.

Now that old man in you and in me has got somehow or other by the grace of God to decrease, to get more and more out of the picture, to die and be reckoned dead so that I can say I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live and yet it is not I anymore, not the man that I was, but Christ is alive in me. Now there is no way, says Jesus, to real Christian greatness other than by taking this route.

You see, this is why Christianity cannot be a popular religion. It'll only win the masses insofar as you negate some of these basic principles or mute them. I listened to a certain program within the last few days and I heard of men that had been helped to come from all kinds of backgrounds to start living a new life and I listened for somebody to say that he or she had repented of his sin and been broken by the awareness that he'd broken the law of God.

I didn't hear it. I didn't hear it at all. But Jesus then goes further.

He spelled out the kind of thing implicit in the principle of denying oneself, taking up the cross to die on it. Our Lord really wants us to get the point. There it is in principle.

But now how does He express it further? Well, first of all, to die to oneself in this sense means that as we do so, we shall manifest humility in relation to other people. You know why we're not humble? It's because the self is still so much alive in us and reigning in us. You know the secret of humility? It's self dead with Christ.

Now this is real Christianity now. We are here dealing with a very heart and soul of things. This is not fun, but fun's over, my friend.

We're in a battle now. And it's a very serious one. The glory of God is involved in this.

Oh, there is joy, there is peace, there is hope. Of course there is, but it's a serious joy nevertheless. There is always this serious sobering side to Christian joy.

There is pain, and it's the pain of battle, and that a battle to secure the death of myself, the old nature in me, the old man I was, the old person I used to be. It's got to die. And this is painful.

The self that itches to be first and foremost, if not the only one in the picture, has got to be so transformed and metamorphosed that he or she is prepared to be the last. Now this is the greatest miracle in this world. Have you got a person in your home who's always showing and exhibiting this itch? I must be first.

I must be served. I must be in the center of the picture all the time. I, I, I. And you have no peace.

You have no joy. It disturbs your prayer life. It disturbs your service.

It disturbs your testimony. I tell you, my friend, that person's got to die. And it is only out of that real dying with Christ by His Spirit and His Word that the little beautiful flower of humility will begin to blossom forth.

Now Matthew adds a word to this. He puts a slightly different application. We can't compare and contrast here.

But Matthew makes it so, so absolutely vital. He says that Jesus told them, King James, except you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Put a child in the midst, you remember.

We'll come to that just now. And he said, except you be converted, literally the word is turn. But you see, taken in its context, what Jesus meant is this.

All of us like to think of ourselves as on the up and up. I'm getting more important. You're getting more important, you know.

And everybody ought to think highly of me and praise me. Don't you, don't you think like that? Now says Jesus to get even into the kingdom of God, you've got to turn. And out of a self-knowledge that only comes from the knowledge of God, you've got to say to yourself, if people only knew me, they'd think less and less of me.

You know anything of that turning? That makes you like the dust and ashes in the presence of God. Want to put your hand across your mouth rather than brog and be arrogant and proud. Whatever else such conversion or turn means then, it means that.

It means turning away back from pursuing the glory of the self and the primacy of the self and the liberty to express oneself, doesn't matter what other people feel or think. It means a complete reversal of that, the crucifixion of the self. The great Dr. Thomas Guthrie, renowned scholar of former age, puts it very beautifully, I think.

He says the Christian is like the ripening corn. The riper he grows, the more lowly he bends his head. My friends, that's true.

The riper you and I are, the more lowly do we bend our heads before God. As a sense of humility that is at the heart of the genuine Christian experience. Let me put it to you like this.

Our Lord was essentially humble. And if the spirit of our Lord is dwelling and certainly, if he's preeminent in you and in me, there must be something of this humility. I am puzzled and bewildered as a pastor to hear men say that they've been filled with a spirit and they're as proud as old Satan himself.

And they want their own will and they will fight and they will do anything to get their own way. It doesn't make sense. It just doesn't square up, you see.

Jesus was courageous. And when it was a matter of doing the will of God, he'll turn the tables of the money changers upside down all on his own. Oh, yes.

But my, he was humble. I am meek and lowly in heart. Augustine said a long time ago, it is pride that changed angels to devils.

It is humility that makes men as angels. Are you walking this way, my friend? Are you walking the way of the cross toward the greatness of which Jesus spoke? Or is your concept of greatness simply a matter of getting your own way and becoming bloated in your own imagination? Oh, are we fighting to maintain the supposed dignity of that which Jesus said should be put to death? You know, if I had power, there's one

thing I would like to do. I'd like to summon back from the grave, dear old A.W. Tozer and let him stand in this pulpit and talk in my place this morning.

I never met him in the flesh, but boy, I would like to hear him speak to you good people and to me. For if there was anything that he discovered, it was this, it was this awful principle in the heart of the saints of God, apparently. We're unwilling to die.

We'll do anything other than die. We'll put our hands deeper in our pocket. Yes, we'll serve this and we'll go on that board and we'll do this, but we will not die.

And God wants us to die to ourselves. And until we die to ourselves, we cannot know the fruit of the Spirit in all its fullness in our own lives and in the lives of our families and those we touch. But now, along with the expression of humility in action to others, Jesus stresses this, the activity of a servant in relation to everybody.

I told you this is hard to take. Listen to it again in case you didn't get it the first time. I'm sure I've read this 50 times these last three days.

If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all. Now you see, I've come a long way when I can see myself as meant to be the servant of some people. We've had a staff day away in prayer and study this week.

We've had a very happy time and we were all of one mind that the Lord has given us a great privilege to serve among you good people. You're a very easy people to serve, apart from one or two. I don't mean that really.

It's a great privilege to serve in some spheres of our own choice. But Jesus didn't say that. What Jesus said is this, if you are a candidate toward real Christian greatness, which is just another word for sanctification and holiness and God-likeness, then he says the way is this, you must look upon yourself not just as a servant, not just as a servant of the people you choose to serve.

You know, they're nicely dressed and people who say thank you and they'll invite you to their homes and you never know, they'll send you lovely Christmas cards and what else. Heaven only knows what they'll do for you to show their appreciation. But not only them, the servant of all.

It's that little word that hits me, you see. All. I don't find that easy.

And this is what serves to show whether the ego in me is really wilting a little. Whether it is anywhere near the cross of Christ. Whether there is anything in the shape of mortification, to use Paul's words, in me.

It is whether I am prepared to serve the lowest and the least. Now because that lesson was so very important, Jesus accompanied it, accompanied his words with an illustration. I suppose I'll have to stop there this morning.

He took a child. Jesus did not always illustrate. Sometimes his sermons were mere illustrations.

Sometimes he spoke as he did here. He gave the principles in clear cut language, plain language, and then he illustrated. Now this is what he does here.

He took a child and he placed him somewhere in the center, or as one of the Gospels says, near himself. Now it could mean both. It could mean that they were probably in a semicircle, that is that the disciples were in a semicircle, and so he put him in the center but near to himself.

We don't know who this little child was and it doesn't really matter, but the point is, Jesus placed him there. Now that's the key word. Jesus took the child.

Jesus didn't go and ask the child, Sonny, will you stay? Or, girly, must be careful, let's be, you know. Are you willing for me to put you there? He didn't ask him that. Jesus took the child and he put the child there.

And the child was quite happy, apparently. The child didn't mind where he was. He'd been put there.

He was quite happy about it, you see. He was unselfconscious. Then later, Jesus took the child up and apparently the child was just as, just as happy when Jesus put his arm around his, a beautiful Greek word, which means he cupped his arm around the child.

What a beautiful concept. He cupped his elbow, his arm around the child, and here he's got the child on his breast, on his bosom, and he's nursing him there. The child still is, still is happy.

Now, says Jesus, that's humility. When you have lost your own will in this sense, that you're pleased to be placed where I put you, to be lifted where I lift you, that's humility. To go where I send, to do what I say, to be what I want, and with the simplicity of a child, you respond to me as the one who has the right to rule.

But the illustration goes beyond that. As Jesus thus clasped the young, undiscerning, dependent child in his arms, so also are we to serve the least. He illustrates something else at one and the same time.

He illustrates how he, the Lord of glory, the highest one, is here actually serving, nursing, putting his arms around, welcoming a little child, the least. I don't suppose the little child will have the capacity to say, say thank you. They don't know how old the kid he was, or whether he could speak even.

But you see, that's not the point. Jesus had come to serve the least, and he says, look at me. I, the Lord of glory, I'm going to take this little mite up in my arm, and I'm telling you that you've got to be as welcoming to the least.

Now, there's a sequel to that, and I have no time to go into it this morning, but perhaps it'll suffice just to say this. John blurted up, Master, he said, you see, he'd seen the point, and it had got home. And this should happen in every place where the gospel is preached, where the word of God is expounded.

John, the beloved, says, Master, he says, you know, we saw a man, and he was casting out demons in your name, but we stopped him, he says, because he wasn't of us. He wasn't belonging to us, and so we thought we ought to shut him up. And somehow or other, you see, John recognized instinctively that the spirit that Jesus was trying to inculcate in the disciples was so contrary to that, he says, Lord, we must have made an awful, he didn't put it in these words, but that's the implication of it.

We must have made an awful blunder then when we told that fellow to shut up just because he didn't belong to us. There is an exclusivism which is completely wrong. And if you're not of my brand, well, keep away.

Whereas as far as the New Testament is concerned, if a man is in Christ, he is heir to all the treasures of God, and we should see every man and every woman in Christ as our brother. Now, Jesus goes on to

elucidate that, but I'm not going to say any more about it. I want to leave it there.

You see the point? Which way are we walking? Oh, yes, we would like to be among the great, all right. Have we got the correct concept of greatness to start with? Have we got the New Testament concept of greatness? Very well then. Are we moving in the way outlined by our Lord, which is a way down, down, down until self grows less and less by the ministry of the Spirit and of the Word and by the providence of God and the overruling of his will in our circumstances until he brings us to the place where we can honestly say, not my will but thine be done.

Put me there like a child or lift me up there. It doesn't matter. If it is your will, we can sing like a seventeenth-century saint in a dungeon in France who says that she will sing as a little bird in her cage and give the best voice that she can if only she has the knowledge that God put her in the cage.

That's it. Brothers and sisters, are you and I as honest as John was? As we listen to this Word this morning, isn't there something in our consciences which says, my word, if that's the right thing, then such and such a thing I did or said or believe needs rectifying? Will you do it? Will you acknowledge it? Will you tell him so? Will you let him correct it? And will you put yourself anew into his hand as we enter into a new year and a new decade, probably the most significant in the history of this country and of this continent? I bid you in the name of my Lord so to do and to his name be the glory even forevermore.

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