

“GREATEST SERVANTS AND SINNERS”

by Steve Hammond, Sunday, March 17, 2019

Mark 9:33-50 at NFBC

//33 And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 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.”//

—Mark 9:33-35 ESV

We should be very careful with our temptation to snicker, or outright laugh, at the disciples for being caught by Jesus arguing about which one of them was the greatest. It was surely a normal aspiration prior to Jesus’ elevation of things like “the last will be first and the first will be last” and “blessed are the poor” and the “meek,” etc.. It’s even normal today, after two thousand years of Jesus’ influence on the subject.

Whenever I hear the subject of people being the greatest, I can’t help but hear Muhammed Ali saying, “I am the greatest!” And then he’d prove it by knocking out the other guy trying to be the greatest. Crowds still cheer for this tried and true direct approach on the subject. And I suspect that was the approach of the disciples, even if they weren’t exchanging punches.

The scriptures mercifully give no details, but we can’t help but think the conversation could well have started by the contrast between the three privileged apostles, Peter, James and John having been able to be with Jesus at his transfiguration vs the nine other apostles who not only were left behind from that mountain top experience, but were also embarrassed by the fact that none of them could cast the demon out of that boy. It doesn’t take much to imagine that frustration being fuel for someone from either side sparking an argument as to who among them was the greatest.

Do you ever find yourself in such a state of mind? I think it might be a little harder for Christians to admit we think this way at times, because we get to look back at this very passage, and others like it, and know Jesus has a different take on the matter. But that doesn’t mean it’s not in us to think this way. It is. And our silence is just as loud as that of the apostles was when Jesus asked them what they’d been talking about.

What ideas of greatness have you been silent about lately? What jealousy and/or arguments have you had going through your mind?

You don’t have to answer. Jesus already knows. And Jesus’ words to his disciples had us in mind as well. So let’s follow where he goes with this.

1. Be aware of the greatness behind and below you.

//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." 36 And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."//

The world's way is pretty straightforward here. The greatest is the person at the top, the number one position, receiving all the benefits and acknowledgments. It is competitive; there are winners and losers and lots of pride. Here is an easy little test to see how invested we are in the world's way of greatness, as C. S. Lewis elaborates on "The Great Sin":

If you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, 'How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take any notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronise me, or show off?' The point is that each person's pride is in competition with every one else's pride. It is because I wanted to be the big noise at the party that I am so annoyed at someone else being the big noise. Two of a trade never agree. Now what you want to get clear is that Pride is essentially competitive – is competitive by its very nature – while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone. That is why I say that Pride is essentially competitive in a way the other vices are not. . . Greed may drive men into competition if there is not enough to go round; but the proud man, even when he has got more than he can possibly want, will try to get still more just to assert his power. Nearly all those evils in the world which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of Pride.

---From *Mere Christianity*, chapter on The Great Sin, pp 109-110

Then too, Jesus says the way to real greatness is to be aware of the real greatness behind us and below us, more than in us, like a child with a great parent behind him. However great we may think we are, or actually be, there is someone behind us who served us and enabled us to reach that mark.

And speaking of service, that is the key to the greatness God has in mind. The greater you want to be, the greater you need to serve. I have two examples on this. The first is from many years ago where a friend of mine, a roommate at the time, served as a player-coach for our church softball team. Before he became coach the team had been acting terribly. Everyone was complaining and playing poorly. My friend cured this by doing one thing. He put himself last, literally. He batted last in the line up. He took the position of catcher, which no one else wanted. He was objectively one of the best players on the team, as demonstrated by his hustle and talent. Yet he put himself last. The result was he cured the team of complaining. How could you complain about where you were playing

or batting when the coach and the best player on the team had a worse position than you?

The other example is recent and I have wanted to mention this for weeks now. We did a funeral back in January here in the vestry. It went very well, but nearly didn't go at all. The plumbing had frozen and was caught just short of being a disaster. So while the funeral took place in the usual fashion, and while it could seem like the pastor and others speaking and cooking and doing many great things, were doing the greatest things... I can't help but think of Bill and Dick and Jack who were literally below us working on the plumbing enabling us to conduct the service upstairs.

(I should also note that Jack and Sandy were at it again with no one above them, as the pipes came up with a new trick just a week ago.)

All this is very much in keeping with Jesus idea and example of greatness. But there's more.

2. Beware of dismissing the greatness of outsiders not following you.

//38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, [a] and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 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. 40 For the one who is not against us is for us. 41 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.//

We can be very territorial with this subject of greatness. Businesses want to maintain the integrity of their name brand and control their great product. Countries and governments always want to be great... or be "great again." Even church can be this way. Understandably so at times. But sometimes we can go too far in our concern for "quality control."

Here John tells Jesus of someone casting out demons "in your name" and that he told him to stop because he wasn't following with them. You've got to admit there's some irony here, as the guy is casting out demons – something Jesus' own disciples had had trouble doing not too long ago. No matter. The guy was an outsider.

Jesus, however, affirmed the stranger's work. And he gave his disciples a broad measure by which they could evaluate the next situation that might come along. "For the one who is not against us is for us," he said. This is interesting. So long as someone is not doing something against the disciples, they should not worry about doing anything against them. Fair enough. In fact, the guy was doing a very good thing and so even if the guy *wanted* to do or say something bad about Jesus' disciples later, he would find it difficult to do so.

Therefore, let the outsider be great, even if he's not following directly with you. He can still be serving the great purposes of Christ.

Then finally there is this:

3. Be warned by demonstrations of great sin.

//42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,^[b] it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell,^[c] to the unquenchable fire.^[d] //

Notice in this section Jesus likens his disciples to a child. The greatness of the child is the father behind him. And the greatness of the disciples is Jesus behind them and the heavenly Father behind Jesus. Here Jesus' reference to "these little ones" isn't simply expressing sentimentality toward children. He is talking about those who believe in him, like children, and no doubt are new and vulnerable believers in Christ.

There is a great evil involved for anyone causing a believer to sin, to stumble and fall. Don't do this! Don't be a part of this! This *does* call for vigilance and action. Don't stand by and let it happen.

Think of how precious is a new life, all the things that had to come together just right to make it possible. All the things needed to give it growth and bring it to maturity. Our instinct is to protect such things, as illustrated by a video of a little girl protectively cradling in her arms a helpless squash from becoming dinner. Our faith in Christ has that kind of preciousness about it. It may be but a mustard seed, but it is no small miracle for new faith, any faith, in Christ to exist. And God takes seriously any threats against his children.

Remember Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5? Their lies and hypocrisy were a threat to the newborn church. And God made a most serious example out of them to put a great fear of God into the hearts of those who wanted to appear great in the eyes of men but not of God.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be great. So long as it's greatness as a servant in Christ and not a greatness in sin. Just be aware of the way God measures greatness. And beware of putting down or trying to put a stop to those outside your personal priority of greatness. And do be warned and vigilant against the great evil someone may do when it comes to causing a new believer to stumble in sin.

Be great in Christ.

Be great by being greatly cautious about sin.

Be great by being greatly generous toward outsiders.

Be great by being a lowly servant with the greatest Lord behind you.