

## Who Gets to be the Greatest?

**Text:** Mark 9:30-41 (See also Matt. 18:1-10; Luke 9:43-50)

### Introduction:

1. Context: The healing of the demon possessed boy
2. Christ will now seek to further instruct the disciples concerning His impending death, burial and resurrection which will give rise to a dispute amongst the disciples concerning who would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. Christ will then teach the disciples a simple, yet powerful lesson about the nature of true greatness.
3. We will divide the text into 3 divisions for this study.

### I. The Model of Greatness (Vs. 30-32)

#### A. The Lord's Cross (Vs. 30-31)

1. The learners (Vs. 30-31a)
  - a. "they departed...and passed through Galilee" = Christ and his disciples commence the return journey from the northern area of Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum.
  - b. "he would not that any man should know it" = the reason for our Lord's desire for privacy is given in the next verse – "For he taught his disciples". Our Lord's focus was on preparing the disciples for their future ministry.
2. The lesson (Vs. 32b)

He taught them concerning...

  - a. The Son's crucifixion
    - i. "is delivered" = though the actual event was still future, in the mind of Christ it was already determined. The present tense reveals the certainty and imminence of the coming cross. On the human side, it appeared that Christ was delivered to death by the will of man. But in reality, Christ was delivered by the Father to be the sacrifice of for our sins.
      - Rom. 8:32 *"He that spared not his own Son, **but delivered him up for us all**, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"*
      - Acts 2:23 *"Him, being **delivered** by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."*
      - John 12:27 *"Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: **but for this cause came I unto this hour.**"*

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- ii. “into the hands of men” = imagine! The Creator in the hands of the creature. The Saviour in the hands of sinners. Oh, my sins were those hands that laid hold on the blessed Saviour and nailed Him to the cross. My sins cried out that day, crucify him crucify him!
  - iii. “they shall **kill** him; and after that he is **killed**” = Christ would die a real death for sin. The Gospel message is that “Christ died for our sins”
- b. The Son’s resurrection
- i. “he shall rise the third day” = The second ‘shall’ is as absolute and sure as the first!
  - ii. See Luke 24:1-8
3. Challenge: Christ is the perfect example of true humility (Phil. 2:8)

### B. The Disciples Callousness (Vs. 32)

1. “they understood not” = Matthew adds that Christ’s words made them “exceeding sorry” (Matt. 17:23). The disciples wrong thinking and expectations were the root cause of why they were unreceptive to our Lord’s instruction concerning the cross. Is it no wonder that before Christ began to teach them, he had exhorted them to “Let these sayings sink down into your ears.” (Luke 9:44)
2. Their concept of a reigning Messiah made them unreceptive to this truth. H.S. Paisley: “The thoughts of Jesus on the journey, were of His sacrifice, yet His followers were filled with selfish thoughts of elevation to chief positions in the Messianic Kingdom, which they expected to be set up upon their arrival at Jerusalem.”

## II. The Maxim (principle) of Greatness (Vs. 33-37)

### A. The Inquiry concerning Greatness (Vs. 33-34)

1. The location – in the house at Capernaum (possibly Peter’s house)
2. The question – Christ inquired as to the subject of their disputation. Christ already knew the answer to the question (Lk. 9:47) but asked them for their benefit.
3. The response – they held their peace as they had been arguing about who would be the greatest in Christ’s kingdom. Luke’s account links this dispute as the disciples’ response to Christ’s teaching concerning the cross – “**Then** there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest.” (Lk. 9:46) The word ‘disputed’ means “vigorously discussing, arguing over a disputed point. The impf. tense implies that these arguments continued for some time.” (Hiebert)
4. Phillips: “We can well imagine the kind of things that they had said. Doubtless, Peter would have claimed primacy. After all, he was the one who had made the great declaration. He was the one whose

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name the Lord had changed in consequence. James and John, “the sons of thunder,” would have disagreed. If anyone stood highest in the Lord’s favour, it was they. After all, were they not the Lord’s cousins? Judas would have staked his claim on the grounds that he was a Judean; moreover, he was the only one to hold office. He was the treasurer.”

5. While Christ was consumed with the cross, they were consumed with carnality. While Christ was consumed with self-denial, they were consumed with self-promotion and self-glory.
6. Challenge: When confronted with the cross, the self-life rose up, claiming the crown. This is one of the key manifestations of the self-life, to seek the crown without the cross. The cross provoked a revolt in the self-life.

### B. The Instruction about Greatness (Vs. 35)

1. “If any man desire to be first” = the word ‘desire’ is from the Greek word ‘thelo’ meaning “to will.” It “indicates one’s continuing resolve or determination to occupy the position of being first in relation to those around him.” (Hiebert)
2. “the same shall be last of all, and servant of all” = Christ states the truth about true greatness. Luke 9:48 “...for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great.”
3. ‘servant’ = (diakonos) an attendant, one who renders free service to others.
4. Phillips: “In one short sentence, He turned upside down their whole scale of values, and ours as well. The way to true greatness in the Master’s service is to become the servant of all.”
5. What a simple and yet profound statement of truth. To be first in God’s economy you need to put yourself at the very last. To be great, you need to be the servant of all.
6. See Mark 10:35-45 where our Lord confronts the same problem in the disciples and declares Himself the ultimate example of humility.
7. See John 13:3-15 where Christ washed the disciples’ feet.

### C. The Illustration of Greatness (Vs. 36-37)

Christ illustrates true greatness. The illustration of the child taught...

1. A lesson in salvation (Matt. 18:3)
  - i. ‘converted’ = to turn, turn around
  - ii. We need childlike humility to admit our need
  - iii. We need childlike faith to accept Christ’s gift
2. A lesson in service (Vs. 37)
  - i. Little children would have been the last people on the disciple’s minds concerning the kingdom. But Christ teaches that to be truly great in His eyes, you need to serve the smallest people.

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- ii. 'receive = means to receive to oneself, welcome, to give a kindly reception, to extend warm fellowship. Romans 15:7  
*"Wherefore **receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.**"*
- iii. "receiveth me...him that sent me" = when we treat a child in that manner, Christ views it as an act of service done directly to Himself and the Father
- iv. Note: We get a window in this verse into Christ's heart towards children. Your attitude towards the little ones in Christ's kingdom reveals a lot about how Christlike you truly are.

### III. The Misunderstanding of Greatness (Vs. 38-41)

#### A. John's Confesses (Vs. 38)

1. "followeth not with us" = mentioned twice. Reveals the carnal motivation of the disciples. They weren't concerned to assess whether this man was a true disciple of Christ or not. They were only concerned about their own position and prominence.
2. "we forbid him" = they actually obstructed this man's service for the Lord on account of their selfishness.
3. The disciples thought greatness meant self-promotion and self-assertion rather than self-denial. They were not concerned about the Lord's honour but their own.

#### B. Jesus' Corrects (Vs. 39-41)

1. Christ points out that the fruit of the man's life bore witness of his discipleship. In practice, he was actually a friend of the truth and therefore on their side! The disciples had drawn swords with the wrong man!
2. Christ gives a second illustration to further impress these truths on their minds. In the previous illustration, Christ taught that to greatness involves serving the smallest people. Now He teaches that greatness involves the smallest acts of service. To be great people we need to be little people, doing the little things for the glory of God!

### Conclusion:

1. Have you been converted? Will you come to Christ with childlike humility and childlike faith?
2. What is your view of greatness? Does it line up with Christ's definition or the world's definition?