

"33 They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. 35 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." 36 Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me." 38 John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. 40 "For he who is not against us is for us." Mark 9:33-40, NAS95.

I find it intriguing that after what has just occurred and the disciples are not connecting the dots as to who Jesus is, principally because they have taken their eyes off of Him in the work He has called them to do, that this passage of Scripture brings us to see the disciples talking about themselves and their greatness when on the one hand they have been complete failures.

The first thing Jesus says is in response to the fact that the disciples were discussing who of them was the greatest. Verse 34: "But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest." To this Jesus responds with his first word (verse 35): "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.'"

He doesn't destroy the pursuit of greatness but he describes a pathway on which the pursuit of greatness will be radically transformed in the New Kingdom.

It is another echo of the Sermon on the Mount and a radical call to discipleship.

Nowhere does Jesus criticize a person for pursuing true greatness or true significance in the sense that perhaps we made a difference while being salt and light on the earth.

And then, in God's providence there is the greatness that He has ordained through those who are not believers but still have a place in the eternal purpose of God.

Many non-believers have been responsible for many tremendous things that have helped millions of people throughout human history.

But what has occurred for the most part in longing for greatness is that it has been

1. it has been corrupted into a longing not to be great, but to be known as great; and
2. it has been corrupted into a longing not to be great, but to be greater than someone else.

In other words, the joy of true greatness has been perverted by sin into the carnal pleasure we sinners get when others praise us and when we think we are greater than others are. Jesus sees this in his disciples and instead of destroying the whole distorted thing, he describes a pathway on which it will be radically transformed and God honoring in a deliberate way.

He says true greatness is not wanting to be first while others are second and third and fourth, but true greatness is the willingness to be last. And true greatness is not positioning yourself so that others praise you, but true greatness is putting yourself in a position to serve everyone—to be a blessing to as many as you possibly can.

So Jesus doesn't condemn the quest for greatness. He radically transforms it. Go ahead and pursue it, he says. But the path to greatness is down, not up.

Take pastors, for example: the measure of true greatness is not how many people come to his church, or how many books he has written, or how many conferences he speaks at, or how many stations carry his radio program. The measure of true greatness is to what degree has the desire for self-exaltation been crucified? How much heartfelt desire to serve others has there been? How much readiness and willingness to decrease while others increase?

Beware how you measure greatness in the servants of the Lord. Paul said, "Do not pronounce judgment before the time, until the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God" (1 Corinthians 4:5; cf. Romans 2:29).

The disciples, out of Jesus hearing (so they thought), had been arguing about who was the greatest amongst them. Andrew could have claimed that he'd been the first of the twelve to have met Jesus, and that it was he who'd gone to Peter and told him, "We've found the Messiah" (Jn. 1:41). Then Peter could have made his claim that he'd been the one to have said to Jesus himself, "Thou art the Son of the living God," and Christ had told him that he had been specially blessed by God because this truth had been revealed to him by the Father. He was surely the greatest. Hadn't Jesus given him a special name, and told him that as he confessed that Jesus was the Christ that that declaration of Peter's would be the rock on which Christ would build his church? Then the apostle John could have gone into another dimension of love and pleaded that a unique affectionate relationship existed between Christ and himself. He was the disciple that Jesus loved. You can imagine the argument going on amongst them with even Judas telling them, "Don't forget about practical matters. I've been appointed the treasurer. I have the responsibility of keeping the money," and so on.

Of course we don't know what they were specifically saying

The Savior had heard the raised voices, and when they entered a house in Capernaum and sat down he asked them what they were arguing about. They didn't say a thing. There was a long embarrassed silence. Jesus had been talking to them about his betrayal and cross and resurrection, and they hadn't understood why he was talking about such a fate in that way. They were not connecting all the dots we discussed last week.

In fact we are told that they were afraid to ask him about it (v.32). In other words, their own spirits were not in tune with Jesus' spirit. The Lord Christ is the most approachable person in the world, but his disciples were afraid to approach him. They thought, how could the Son of God ever be killed by men? He had power over death. How could he be the one to suffer? If he were going to die in that way then what in the world would happen to them? They were afraid to talk to him about such things. He was deeply serious when he spoke to them about the cross. He was totally committed

to this goal, but whenever he raised that theme there was disharmony between them. They didn't want to talk to him about it. They did not understand but they did not say help my unbelief as the man pleaded when asking Jesus to cast out the demon from his son.

They had been with him for about two years. They had seen him raise the dead, and calm the storm. They had heard the sermon on the mount, but they were not connecting the dots. So it is time for him to teach them once again. That is the way, steady repetitive instruction examining truth from different angles. The Lord has important things to say to them about what is true greatness.

Are we permitted even to think let alone speak in terms of one Christian being 'greater' than another? Are not all Christians equally made in God's image, and equally sinners in need of salvation, and equally granted marvelous redemptive privileges? Of course that is true; we are all one in Christ Jesus. But it is in gifts and in maturity that we differ from one another. Some are novices, while others have kept the faith and lived lives of godliness for fifty years. Some parts of our bodies are more important than others. When the early church chose deacons they looked around for men who were full of the Spirit of God and wisdom. They didn't pick the first seven men who walked into the meeting that morning. So what is real greatness? It needn't be the fact that you had met Jesus Christ before anyone else did, or that you have a better theological knowledge than others, or that you have strong feelings and emotions towards Christ. Jesus gives us three things which define greatness by His standard. 1. THE GREATEST MUST BE THE VERY LAST.

"Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last,'" (v.35).

"9 For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men." 1 Corinthians 4:9, NAS95.

Remember that it is the 'Twelve' whom our Lord is addressing, and Paul is writing about the 'apostles' being put on display. They are both referring to the men of greatest gifts and authority in the whole world, to these men who have had the mightiest privileges of any people on the face of the globe. These men saw the risen Lord. They were sent

Mark 9:33-40 New Covenant Baptist Fellowship Pastor Joseph Krygier July 6 2008, 5  
out as Christ's own delegates. On the day of Pentecost they were baptized with the Holy Spirit. Christ stands in closest identity with these men saying, "If men actually receive you then they receive me and they receive the one who sent me." That is Christ's estimation of them, but where are they in the estimation of the world? The answer is that they are found exactly where Christ was, and where the Christian church will always be if it is faithful to its Master. Talk about greatness.

The Corinthian congregation had the tendency to put its various teachers on pedestals, one group claiming that Peter was the greatest, and another that Apollos was the top man, and another bragging in Paul. Where had God put these men?

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What does God do to make sure that the salt doesn't lose its savor is amazing. He puts the church on the scaffold, and on the rack, and in the concentration camp, and chains it to the flaming stake. To promote the kingdom of God the apostles are put on display at the end of the procession.

Such suffering is God's will. We have to say as tenderly as we can such a hard message to the grieving widows of those brave pastors in Iran who were murdered in the last decade. "It was the will of God for those men to die and go home to heaven." We have to say it to the church in Nigeria and in Southern Sudan and in China where it is being persecuted and imprisoned and killed. The great Savior whom you follow is teaching you what is true greatness as he allows you to suffer for him. He says to you, "Blessed are you when men revile and persecute you . . ." Remember where that phrase came from? In that prison, or facing that firing squad, is exactly where God has placed you. You are at the end of the procession.

That picture would be very vivid to the Corinthian church. It is the scene of the victorious army returning from battle. They have waited outside the city for the great triumphant entry. First there are the generals, the commanders, and the men who have

distinguished themselves by acts of heroism. Then come the troops - your father and brother and son, and you shout your welcomes and hurrahs throwing bunches of flowers before these soldiers. Then come the prisoners, the leaders of the defeated nation, kept for ransom, booed and hissed at by the crowds. Then right at the end are the condemned men, those on their way to the arena to fight with the gladiators and thrown to the beasts, demoralized men covered in mud and the filth that's been thrown at them, bruised and bleeding from the rocks which young and old have hurled, torn by the dogs that have been turned on them. These despised ones, who are the very last, are off to a cruel and unavoidable death

Paul says to the Corinthian church, "That is where I and Peter and Apollos and John are to be found. We are not leading the troops into Rome to shake hands with Nero. We are at the rump of the procession, hated by the world." The false teachers were self-promoting; "We are the greatest!" But the apostles of the Son of God were on their way to crucifixion or to being burnt alive. There was going to be no commando raid of a legion of angels who were going to deliver them at the last moment. They were going to die. They were not going fishing; they were not going on vacation; they were not going to die on a bed surrounded by their loved ones. They were going to an unspeakable death, hated by the world. Disciples are never above their Master. If it hated him then the closest to Jesus these men live then they are certainly going to be hated too. The more faithful they are to his message, the more identical will be the response of the world. Jesus makes it clear; "I send you out as sheep amidst wolves." So Paul says, "We apostles are off to the arena, shuffling along at the end of the procession, the condemned men."

"We have been made a spectacle," says Paul, "to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men." You know that word 'spectacle' how it is used by a parent waiting for a badly behaved child to get home, and eventually rebuking sternly, "You made a spectacle of yourself today and we were ashamed of you. We look for some modesty and dignity and self-control not that behavior." Fathers are concerned for their children's behavior. But our Father in heaven didn't spare his own beloved Son from

being stripped naked, and hung on a cross suspended by nails through his hands and feet, mocked for hours as he died, and God nowhere makes a promise to spare us from suffering and death at the hands of the world if the hatred is caused by our truly following him. Jesus was made a spectacle before the world, and all who walk close to him will be considered a spectacle too.

There can be no Christian testimony in many countries today without knowing something of this hatred. When the late Albert Fallaize was a missionary in Morocco forty years ago there were many times when he faced the hatred and rejection experienced by many Moroccan Christians. His biographer, Roger K. Snook, describes Albert going to the weekly market in their local town of Sale where he had a stall from which he would sell the Scriptures. He would often stand up and read a part of the Bible out loud. People would gather round and sooner or later someone would ask what he was reading. Many would stay to listen and some bought copies for themselves. On one occasion a number of extremist fundamentalist young men gathered round Albert and started mocking him; then they began to chant, "God is Great! Allah is Great!" circling him so that he could not move away.

People in the market were drawn by the noise and the abuse intensified, and went on for what seemed like an hour. Then, as they worked themselves up to hysteria, the first stones were thrown. One struck Albert on the face; he bore the scar for the rest of his days. He stood quietly, a sheep amidst wolves, just committing the situation to the Lord. The rocks were whistling down on Albert, when suddenly someone pushed through the crowd, and came to stand next to Albert. God sent someone to protect his own sheep. God often does that. It was a young man, but with some presence and an air of authority. He actually subdued the crowd with a few words and the rain of stones stopped. Then with an unhurried pace, he walked with Albert towards the crowd; they parted and the two of them passed through to safety. It was not the first time the two had met, Albert having had many conversations with the lad on previous occasions. He was a Muslim and objected to the Christian position. Nevertheless, the impact of Albert's witness to Jesus Christ had made a real impression on him - as was seen by

God can use all means to protect his people, but he never promises that we will be always be delivered from pain.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians and made reference to the apostles at the back of the procession his memory was fresh with an incident that had just occurred. It is recorded by Luke in Acts 19 which describes the gospel's arrival in Ephesus. Soon the mob was roused by the preaching of Christ and they seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's companions, and dragged them to the arena to kill them. Since the time of Stephen those who have lived for Jesus and spoken up for him have known the hatred of the world. Those Christians in various denominations who today are resisting the recognition of practicing homosexuals as ordained preachers of Christ are meeting the contempt of the Media. They are being set at the very end of the procession in the eyes of the world. They are considered as fools because of Christ.

This must happen to every true Christian. Let's bring it home by this simple story recounted by Peter Jeffery. He was working one summer when he was a theological student in the local cemetery. The superintendent was utterly contemptuous of his faith and one day he pointed out a man walking past. "You see that man?" he asked Peter, "Christianity ruined him." "How is that?" asked Peter. "In the war he led the black market in Neath and he could get you anything - petrol, chocolates, cigars, silk stockings, whiskey, tires. He became one of the richest men in Neath, but then he got 'saved,' and he gave all that up. Christianity ruined him!" That man became a fool in the eyes of the worldly people of Neath. They regarded him as the very last person they would admire, putting him right at the end of the procession, a hopeless man. But Christ esteems such people. They are the great in his eyes. If anyone wants to be first, he must be the last in the world's estimation.