

## The Road To True Greatness

### Mark 9:30-50

**Introduction:** 1) Tony Merida, a pastor and preaching professor at SEBTS says, “The gospel frees us from our addiction to ourselves!” That is a powerful statement. I also believe it is a true statement.

2) Before Christ redeems us and sets us free we are like crack addicts addicted to ourselves. We are like alcoholics intoxicated with ourselves.

- We are not as interested in serving as being served.
- We are not as interested in giving as receiving.
- We are not as interested in pursuing God’s way as we are in getting our way.
- We are not interested in being the least but being the greatest.

3) And we are certain the way to greatness is not by an obedience that leads to death (vs. 30-32), being last and servant of all (vs. 33-38), having others do what we can’t (vs. 38-41), and pursuing a life of self-mutilation that involves some serious suffering (vs. 42-50).

4) And yet ... this is exactly what Jesus says as He lays before us the road to true greatness, greatness as defined by God!

5) We are in the middle of Jesus’ great discipleship discourse (Mark 8-10). Our Lord is turning upside/down the value systems of this world. It is radical and mind blowing through and through. No wonder v. 32 says “they did not understand.” Ours is a world where “everything is about me!” Jesus died to free us from such slavery. He died to free us to serve and to walk a road of true greatness, the road that He Himself walked as He “came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many (Isa. 53:10-12; Mark 10:45).

**Transition:** In Mark 9:30-50 we discover that the road to true greatness is paved with 4 important truths, all of which begin in our mind and then lead to concrete action. The road to true greatness is marked by:

**I. Obedience to the will of God.                      9:30-32**

- Jesus and the 12 moved on from the North of Galilee, probably near Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus had healed a demon-possessed boy the disciples could not (9:14-29). They are passing thru N. E. Galilee headed south to Jerusalem where our Lord will be brutally murdered on the cross. This is the first leg of his final journey.
- His heart and mind are set to obey the Father’s will. He “Must suffer many things” (8:31) and nothing will stop Him in obeying the Father and fulfilling his divinely ordained destiny. Nothing!
- As he focuses on the cross, He also takes time to continue instructing His disciples. They, like us, still have much to learn.

1) **It is important to listen.                                      9:30-31**

- As they head toward the south to Jerusalem Jesus wants to keep his movements a secret. (v. 30).
- Verse 31 explains why: “for he was teaching his disciples.” It also explains what He was teaching them: The Son of Man (Dan. 7:13-14; Mark 8:31), who is Jesus, 1) is going to be delivered into the hands of men, 2) they will kill him, 3) after 3 days he will rise.
- This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of his 3 passion predictions (cf. 8:31-32; 10:32-34). His goal is to prepare them for what lies ahead. His coming death and victorious resurrection is a resounding theme as that inevitable day draws nearer.

- Jesus specifically says He “is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” This word delivered, *paradiodotai*, is used of our Lord’s betrayal by Judas (Mark 3:19; 14:41; Luke 24:7), but also of the Father’s delivering up of His Son (Isaiah 53:6, 12; Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:32). Here I believe the implied agent is God. Ultimately and forever we must never forget: God purposefully killed his Son in order that He might not kill us! Listen to the words of Jesus. The way to the crown is by way of the cross. Salvation is ours by His suffering.

2) It is important to understand. 9:32

- As has been the case throughout our Lord’s ministry the disciples do not understand. Of course we need to be fair to them, because we know now what they did not know then. Only after the cross and resurrection does it all come together and make sense.
- A dying Messiah? I have no room for that in my worldview. A crucified Christ? I have no room for that in my theology. The glorious Son of Man of Daniel 7 is also the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53? That just does not fit into my preconceived thinking of how God does things. Ouch!
- They did not understand and they were afraid to ask Him. In contrast, we should understand and have no fear of asking Him anything. This Savior can be trusted. This Lord is approachable.
- When He speaks we need to listen. What He says we should, with the help of the Holy Spirit, understand. And, when we know His will for our lives, like Jesus, we should obey because God’s will is always perfect (Rom. 12:2). Obedience to the will of God marks the road to true greatness. The road to true greatness has a 2<sup>nd</sup> mark.

## II. Service to Others.

9:33-37

- Jesus and the disciples arrive in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee and retire to a house, probably the home of Peter's mother-in-law (cf. 1:29). This will be His last visit here and as he had done previously He gives private teaching to the 12.
- In spite of what He has taught them about self-denial, dying to self (8:34) and losing their lives for Christ and the gospel (8:35), they still aspire to be sovereigns not servants. They remain deaf to what He has said about the road to true greatness. They still do not understand what it means to follow Jesus. Obeying God and serving others out of an overflow of "gospel gratitude has still not sunk in.
- They had yet to embrace the truth that gripped the heart of missionary David Brainerd who in many ways inspired the modern missionary movement, "It is sweet to be nothing and less than nothing that Christ may be all in all."

### 1) We must overcome the desires of pride.      9:33-34

- While in the house Jesus confronts them about what they were talking about "on the way." (v. 33)
- At first they were silent, no doubt out of embarrassment (v. 34).
- Finally they admit they had argued or debated "with one another about who was the greatest" (v. 34).
- Matters of rank and recognition were important to the Jews of Jesus' day just like they are to most of us in our day. The nature of man and the times have not changed very much. Pride and the cult of personality have always been alive and well, even among the people of God who follow after the lowly Jesus.
- Let's take a "painful pride" test. Answer each question with a simple Yes or No.

- 1) Does it matter to me if I get the recognition for a job well done?
  - 2) Do I like and even long to sit at the head table in the seat of honor?
  - 3) Do I seek credit for what others have done?
  - 4) Do honorary titles pump me up?
  - 5) Is popularity crucial to my sense of self-worth?
  - 6) Am I a name dropper of those I know (or pretend to know?!)?
  - 7) Do I think I have something valuable to say about almost everything?
- Proverbs 11:2 says, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.” James 4:6 adds, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

2) We must overcome the desires for position. 9:35

- With a heart of pride comes a desire for position. It is inevitable.
- Jesus, in grace and tenderness (what a Teacher He is!) sits down taking the traditional position of a rabbi. He then calls the 12 and gives them a simple proverbial maxim: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and ... servant of all.” The word order is instructive in the original language of Greek: “he shall be of all last and of all servant” (*diakonos*).
- It is critical important for us to see that Jesus does not repudiate greatness. He redefines it. Be great in things that matter to God not man. Plato said in *Gorgias* (491e), “How can man be happy when he has to serve someone? (Edwards, 287). Jesus says you will only find real and lasting happiness (joy) when you do serve someone, not because you have to but because you get to and want to.
- Jesus does say there is a position you should aspire to obtain: a *diakonos*, a waiter of tables, one who washes others feet (John 13:1-20) or changes their dirty and soiled

undergarments. The work is not glorious in man's eyes but it is great in God's! Here is a posture and position worthy of heaven!

3) We must overcome the desires for prominence. 9:36-37

- Jesus now illustrates what it means to be a servant of all by “taking a child and putting him in the midst of them.” However, He does not stop there but picks him and takes him in his arms (v. 36). This would have been unusual if not surprising. The ancients, with high infant mortality rates, did not exalt the merits of children as do many modern cultures, especially in the western world. Theirs was not a sentimental society that reveled in the virtues of youth. A little child was an excellent example of the last or least.
- Jesus then startles the disciples by saying, receive one like this on my behalf (“in my name”) and you receive me. In fact it gets even better. Receive me and you receive the one “who sent me” (v. 37). [Note “sending language” dominates John’s gospel]
- Treat well those who have no standing in this world (children, lepers, AIDS victims, mentally impaired, physically disabled, the aged) and you will receive an audience with my Father!
- Jesus points the way to true greatness. Die to self, serve others, care for those no one else cares for. Receive them in my name and you receive Me. Receive Jesus and you get His Father too! The way up is down. The way to get is give. The way to be first is to be last. This is the way of Jesus. This is the way to true greatness. Now, note a 3<sup>rd</sup> mark of true greatness.

### III. Allegiance to Christ.                      9:38-41

- A. T. Pierson said, “The ideal missionary must have 4 passions: 1) a passion for the truth; 2) a passion for Christ; 3) a passion for the souls of men; and 4) a passion for self-sacrificing.”
- At this point the disciples, like many modern Christians, just aren’t there. Oh, they are zealous, of that there can be no doubt. However, it is a zeal that is badly misplaced and in this instance, myopic and self-centered. In fact it is downright sinful.
- The disciples, and in particular the apostle John, are about to learn that God’s kingdom is bigger than their experience of it. It is so large that anyone who is for Christ is with us. Sinclair Ferguson says it so well, “In the last analysis, it is more important that the servants of God are devoted to Christ than that they are to one of us” (*Let’s Study Mark*, 152).

#### 1) The one who is not against Christ is for Christ. 9:38-40

- John voices a concern that is bothering him and the others. He (they) came across someone casting out demons (something they failed at in 9:18!) in Jesus’ name. Apparently they did not know him, and he obviously was not a part of the “in group” of their religious denomination, and so they “tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (v. 38). Us?! Us?! Us!!!
- If John expected a word of affirmation and approval he was sadly mistaken. Jesus responds with a strong imperative of command, “Not forbid him.” You stop him? No! Stop what you are doing! Why, John may have wondered? Jesus provides 2 reasons.
- First, “no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me” (v. 39). Anyone doing these things in my name does so by the

power of God. It is an evidence of my call upon his life (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3). No, do not try and hinder him. Help him. Don't try and restrain him. Rejoice in and with him.

Why?

- Second, “For the one who is not against us is for us” (v. 40). Paul obviously understood this principle when in Phil. 1:15-18 he writes, “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.” Against us/for us leaves no room for neutrality or fence riding.
- And, here is a nobody exalting Somebody while the somebodies are worried about who is following a bunch of nobodies! Who in these verses is on the road to true greatness?

## 2) The one who serves Christ will be rewarded by Christ. 9:41

- Verse 41 contains an illustration of the point Jesus is making under girded again by the authoritative *amen* translated “truly.”
- Whoever: it is all inclusive.
- “Gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ” – serves me and shows his allegiance to me by serving my servants.
- “will by no means lose his reward” – I see and reward the smallest and humblest acts of service done to others in my name. Having a love and concern for others reflects the love and concern I have for the nations (11:17), for those I came to serve and give



my life as a ransom (10:45). Service to others frees us. It gets our eyes off of us and on others who need the same Christ we need.

- An anonymous author has well said, “World Missions is God’s major therapy for our sin of selfishness that eats the heart out of the local church.” Allegiance to Christ will lead us to applaud and celebrate those on God’s team, even if they are different than us!

#### **IV. Fear of Hell.**

#### **9:42-50**

- These 9 verses are a source of great interest on a number of levels. First, they put front and center the cost and serious nature of radical discipleship. Second, they are grouped together and united by various catchwords or phrases: “causes you to sin” (vs. 43, 45, 47), various body parts (vs. 43-47), “hell” (vs. 43, 45, 47), “salt” (vs. 49-50). Third, the phrase in v. 48 “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” is found in some translations as vs. 44 and 46 but not in the *ESV* due to Greek manuscript evidence. This in no way affects the understanding of the passage. Fourth, several of these sayings are found in different contexts in the other gospels (Matt 5:13, 29-30; 18:8-9; Luke 14:34-35). This indicates that Jesus taught these truths on more than one occasion as any good teacher would.
- It is clear from these verses that our Lord had the strongest possible view of judgment and hell. He believed it was real and He believed it lasted forever. In this context, it serves as a warning and as an additional motivation to follow Jesus in devotion and discipleship.

- The great Puritan John Owen said, “be killing sin or sin will be killing you.” I would add, “what you feed will live. What you starve will die.” Jesus now takes us into this territory of spiritual life.

1) Learn the lesson of the great millstone.            9:42

- This is a hinge verse that brings to an end the themes found in vs. 35-41 and then opens the door for what follows in vs. 43-50. It picks up on the theme of a child in vs. 36-37 and those who belong to Christ in v. 41.
- Little ones here does not refer to children but to those who follow Jesus, to disciples. If v. 41 speaks of doing good to them v. 42 addresses just the opposite.
- If you cause just one who believes in Jesus to sin, lit. “to stumble” (Gr. *Skandalizein*), it would be better if a giant millstone (which only large animals like oxen could turn) was hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” Better to be given a pair of cement boots and hurled into the ocean and drowned.
- Jesus, I believe, is still speaking to John and the issue on the table is still their pride and desire for prominence and prestige. God hates pride and his wrath is great against it because it is contrary to His nature and does so much harm. If we do not rid ourselves of the sin that took both Satan and Adam down we will be a stumbling block to others and God will hold us accountable.

2) Learn the lesson of self-mutilation.            9:43-48

- A saving faith is a fighting faith. It will engage the battle against sin and do so with deadly seriousness. Out of gratitude for the new “life” (v. 43, 45) we have in Christ and the “kingdom of God” (v. 47) we now belong to, we pursue a “holy life agenda” with passion and discipline.

- Jesus uses in rapid fire succession 3 powerful hyperboles to warn us of sin’s danger not just to others (v. 42), but also to ourselves.
- We know they are hyperboles not to be taken literally because the Bible forbids bodily mutilation (Deut. 14:1; 23:1; 1 Kings 18:28; Zech 13:6). However, in no way does this diminish or negate the importance of what Jesus is saying. “Things we value supremely, like eyes, hands, and feet – should not stand in the way of eternal life” (Edwards, 294). Better to lose one than lose your soul!
- Eyes, hands and feet are all inclusive of what we see, what we do, and where we go. As important as they are, better to lose them than have them prevent you from entering eternal life and God’s Kingdom.
- Based upon Mark 7:20-23, we understand these acts are connected to a heart that rejoices in sin rather than Christ. But Sam Storm is correct, “Very little, if any, sin comes out of your heart that didn’t first enter through your eyes.” He then adds, “Our external members are but the instruments we employ to gratify the lust that emerges from within. What our Lord was advocating, therefore, [to quote John Stott], was not a literal physical self-maiming, but a ruthless moral self-denial. Not mutilation but mortification is the path of holiness he taught.”
- 3 times in our text Jesus warns us about the dangers of hell, a place where “the fire is not quenched.” “Hell” (*gehenna*, Gk.) is the N. T. word used for the place of eschatological punishment (Matt. 5:29, 30; 10:28; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). The word is transliterated Gehenna from the Hebrew *ge-hinnom*, “Valley of Hinnom,” a deep depression south of Jerusalem where Kings Ahaz (2 Chr. 28:3) and Manasseh (2 Chr. 33:6) offered child sacrifices to the pagan god Molech. Declared unclean by

Josiah (2 Kin. 23:10), it became the place to burn refuse and to dispose of corpses (Is. 66:24; Jer. 31:40). O. T. prophets proclaimed oracles of doom on it, and *gehinnom* became a symbol of final judgment (Is. 31:9; Jer. 7:31, 32; 19:6). It is a place of eternal and unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:43), a lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:10, 14, 15), an eternal fire (Matt. 18:8, 9; 25:41), a furnace of fire (Matt. 13:42), an outer darkness (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), and an eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46). Only God has power to cast both body and soul into hell (cf. also Luke 12:5). It is often said that Jesus said more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. That is true.

3) Learn the lesson of good salt. 9:49-50

- Picking up on the word “fire” in v. 48, Jesus affirms that “everyone will be salted with fire” (v. 49). While we cannot be certain, the word “everyone” should guide our interpretation. “Salt” is a preservative. Thus all will be “salted with fire” in a manner consistent with their relationship to Christ. For unbelievers, it will be the preserving fires of final judgment in hell. For the disciple, it will be the preserving and refining fires of trials and suffering that mark the road to true greatness. Verse 49 is found only in Mark’s gospel. It must have held special significance for him and Peter.
- Verse 50 summarizes this teaching by stating that salt is good as long as it is salty and can serve its purpose. But if it loses its purifying and preserving value then it is worthless and of no value. Therefore, “have salt (pre. imp) in yourselves.” Sinclair Ferguson helps clarify the intent of our Lord’s words for the disciple when he says, “Our Lord’s point is that unless we maintain the purity of our own lives (plucking out the eye, etc.) and are purified by the flames of testing, and remain faithful to Christ,

our lives will have no preserving influence on this corrupt world” (*Let’s Study Mark*, 155).

- Perhaps in light of the disciple’s argument about the greatest (v. 34) and John’s opposition to another brother doing the work of the Lord (vs. 38-41), Jesus draws one simple application from having salt in yourselves: “be at peace (pre. imp) with one another.” Be humble, avoid causing others to stumble or stumbling yourselves. Don’t fuss and fight over positions and status. Be at peace with one another and yourself. Be a witness and reflection of the God given peace you have received from Jesus (Rom. 5:1). Pull for your brothers and sisters in Christ not against them. After all, though we may play different positions, we are all on the same team who follow Jesus as Lord. Here is a path to true greatness where it really matters: in the eyes of our Savior.

**Conclusion:** One of the greatest servants of King Jesus I believe has ever walked the earth was a short thin-haired woman in her last years named Emma Lou. High school educated only, she faithfully served her Lord until the end of her life when Alzheimer’s disease destroyed the precious mind that cared so deeply for her Savior. When rational thought escaped her and moments of panic gripped her, she would voice repeatedly a simple prayer, “Help me Jesus”. At her funeral her son-in-law would remark that he never heard Emma Lou say, “I want.” Even if it was her birthday and you asked her where she would like to go out for dinner her response was always the same, “whatever you all want will be fine with me.” Her daughter-in-law looked to her as if she were her own biological mother.

Her son had the honor of preaching her funeral and did so from Proverbs 31 because Emma Lou was a Proverbs 31 lady. And I have heard him on more than a few occasions recount how she

worked a double shift for 2 weeks from 7:30am – 4:30pm and 10pm – 2am so her son could go on a mission trip, a trip on which God called him to the gospel ministry.

I know so much about this lady named Emma Lou because she was my mother. Was she a great lady in the eyes of the world? Not really. Was she a great lady in the eyes of our Lord? Without a doubt! When I get to heaven I hope to see my mom. I suspect I will need some heavenly binoculars because she will be so close to the Lord's throne and I so far away. She understood and walked the road to true greatness.