

**+ Mark 9:30-37 + True Greatness Is Found in True Service +**  
**+ 18th Sunday after Pentecost + 4 October 2009 +**

As the leaves change on the trees, the time has come again when people ask the question, "Who is the greatest?" For baseball fans, the playoffs are about to start and the debate rages over which team will win the World Series. For football fans, week after week the debate goes on, "Who is the greatest? Who will win the Super Bowl or the National Championship?"

Perhaps you're not a sports fan, but you live in a world that's always looking for greatness. Who is the greatest in business or finance after so many "great ones" have failed? Who is the greatest in education or medicine? Who is the greatest politician? In all these different areas and so many more, people look for greatness. Perhaps even we get caught up in the desire to attain greatness at our job or in school or among our loved ones.

That kind of greatness, however, is fleeting. You may have a great team, but they don't win every year. You may be "great" in business or education or politics, but eventually someone comes along who is greater. In spite of that, we still strive for earthly greatness. So Jesus' words this morning are rather eye-opening. Our definition of greatness is not his definition of greatness. True greatness to the Lord is not prestige or power or wealth or glory, but lowliness and weakness and service and humility. Our Savior turns his eyes to the cross and in doing so he reminds us **TRUE GREATNESS IS ONLY FOUND IN TRUE SERVICE.**

Jesus was nearing the end of his earthly ministry and had turned towards Jerusalem for his final showdown with sin and death. Oppressive crowds always followed him. Verbal attacks came often from his enemies, while others demanded his time. Soon these same crowds would demand his death. It was time for Jesus' disciples to receive some final lessons.

As we heard last week, Jesus pulled his disciples aside to ask them who they thought he was. Peter gave an excellent answer on their behalf. Only moments later, Jesus called him "**Satan**", when Peter denied Jesus' death. Soon after, Jesus took Peter, James and John up a small mountain. Before their eyes, he was transfigured with dazzling light, but the glory soon passed away and they had to leave the mountain. As they made their way into the broad valley north of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus showed his greatness once more by casting a demon out of child, but **"they left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples."**

Jesus and his disciples wound their way around the Sea of Galilee, ever careful to avoid the villages and cities. Along the way, Jesus again told his disciples something they didn't want to hear. **"The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."** He didn't mince any words, but still the disciples willingly ignored what Jesus had to say. Mark tells us, **"They did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."** How would you react if you heard news about a loved one you didn't want to hear? What Jesus was telling them completely defied what they expected. They expected Jesus to take his greatness and his glory to the public. They couldn't bear to think of losing their Teacher, so no one said a thing about it.

Jesus, however, wanted his disciples to understand true greatness. Now Jesus could've had glory and greatness in the eyes of the world, but he willingly set it all aside to become a servant. For a moment consider how great Jesus could have been. He was true God. He had power over all things in heaven and on earth. He could cast out demons, heal the sick, feed thousands and raise the dead. He had wealth beyond imagination because he had created it all. He was popular with the crowds and could've ruled the world for eternity from any ornate throne in any city of his choosing, but in his eyes, there was no greatness in all that.

Don't forget! Christ left behind far greater glory in heaven to become a servant. The King of kings became the servant of all. He wasn't born to a wealthy royal family in a top-notch hospital in Rome or Jerusalem, but to a miserably poor and outcast family amidst the stench of animals in a barn. He didn't surround himself with the scholars and the wealthy and the popular, but with the uneducated and the poor and the "sinner". He didn't climb his way up the corporate or political ladder, but climbed down to the sick and the weak, the guilty and the little children. He didn't even get to pass away comfortably in his bed, but had to endure betrayal, ridicule, beatings, floggings and the most excruciating form of execution in human history, reserved only for the worst criminals and political rebels. The King of kings gave it all up to become the servant of all.

Why did he do that? It wasn't for the prestige or the power or the wealth. He did it for you, though you've never deserved it. So often in self-righteousness you and I think we're great in the eyes of God when we help out a neighbor or participate here at church, yet Isaiah reminds us, **"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags."** Not by any stretch of the Lord's imagination are we "great" in his eyes. "Condemned", yes. "Great", no, but that's when the Servant of all comes to your rescue with his overwhelming love. **"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we**

**might live through him.”** Out of undying love for you, Christ Jesus **“who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”** Jesus showed true greatness through his true service for you and me.

The disciples didn't want to hear that though. They didn't understand what Jesus had to do. It's like they stopped listening after he said, **“They will kill him...”** As they continued their journey, the disciples got into a heated argument, but they weren't arguing about what Jesus was going to do. Their argument was of a far more earthly kind. Jesus asked them, **“What were you arguing about on the road?”** Like caught little children, they quickly stopped, but Jesus knew. **“They had argued about who was the greatest.”** Maybe Peter, James or John argued that they had seen the Savior's glory and therefore must be greatest in Christ's kingdom. Jesus was showing them true greatness in his humble service for them, and yet there they were arguing about prestige and power and popularity that meant nothing to God.

Jesus shook his head. He brought these overgrown children together and sitting down had a little child—maybe 3 or 4 years old—come over to him. Now children weren't placed on a pedestal in society like they are today. Children weren't considered the object of their parents' worshipful attention, but instead often went unnoticed, loved but often unseen. Jesus' “object lesson” quickly humbled these grown men fighting over earthly greatness. The original Greek describes Jesus holding this little one close and looking over the child right at his disciples. **“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all...Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”**

**True greatness is only found in true service.** What does that mean for you, followers of Christ? It means you need to listen to your Savior, even when you don't want to listen. You and I might chuckle about those silly disciples arguing over greatness, but who of us wouldn't be caught in the same debate? Who of us isn't guilty of buying into our world's idea of greatness and quick to pat ourselves on our self-righteous backs? Who of us in our heart of hearts really wants to hear how difficult true greatness in the eyes of God is with no prestige, no power, and no popularity? Like Jesus' disciples, we don't want to listen, but we need to hear what he has to say.

**“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all...Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”** **True greatness is found only true service.** See the greatness of your Savior's love as he embraces the cross he is about to bear for you. See the greatness of your Savior's love as he willingly sacrifices everything to forgive his servants, even when they selfishly seek earthly greatness. See the greatness of your Savior's love in his victory over death for you because he knew you desperately needed it more than anything else. See, then, how the love of Christ motivates you to humbly serve your neighbor, as your service flows from Christ's service for you.

On top of all that, when you serve the unnoticed, the young, the guilty, the weak or the poor, you are actually welcoming your Savior and the One who sent him. What more glorious service can you give to your Lord than by serving little children? What greater service can you give to your Lord than by reaching out even to the poor and lowly? As the Lord's servants, you and I don't strive for greatness in the world's eyes, but for greatness in the Lord's eyes, not to earn his favor or merit heaven. He's already done that for us, but to respond to his loving service for us. Now perhaps the Lord in his grace will bless some one of us to have prestige or wealth or power in this life, but even then, like your Savior you remain **“servant of all”**. As Christ's followers, he calls you to be his servant, because he himself became a servant for you.

The debates will continue to rage over greatness. We might even get caught up in some of the arguments if it involves a favorite team or area of interest, but as servants of the Lord, there is no debate. By humble service that took him to the cross for you, your Savior has shown you the true meaning of greatness. What else can you do than respond with humble, thankful praise? Paul Gerhardt said it best in his hymn, “A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth”, **“From morn till eve, in all I do, I'll praise you, Christ, my treasure. To sacrifice myself for you shall be my aim and pleasure. My stream of life shall ever be a current flowing ceaselessly, your constant praise outpouring. I'll treasure in my memory, O Lord, all you have done for me, your gracious love adoring.”** Amen.