

LESSONS FROM A CHILD

Mark 9:20-30

Introduction:

Well, it has been over a month since our last message from the Book of Mark. It has been a good break, but it is time to get back to this study of the Word.

In 21 messages over the past 9 months we have followed the life and teaching of Jesus as it is recorded by John Mark, a young follower of Jesus. Mark's gospel was written for a non-Jewish audience, probably primarily for the Romans of his day. It is a fairly fast-paced account of Jesus' activity and teaching.

Just a brief review:

First 8 chapters of the book – Jesus demonstrates his rule over nature, disease, the spirit realm, and even death. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, healed lepers, and even raised the dead. He calmed violent storms instantly, and walked on water. He dealt with his disciple's fears, lack of faith and their inability to understand his identity and his mission.

All of this was designed to show his followers that He was indeed the Messiah – the promised One, the Anointed One. When it became apparent that the crowds of curious onlookers, and particularly the Jewish religious leaders, had rejected Him, coming to the conclusion that He could not possibly be the Messiah, He began to withdraw, spending less time with the crowds and more time with his disciples, especially the twelve, whom He had appointed as apostles.

The turning point – 8:27-9:1 – As the time of His death was getting nearer, Jesus began to try to prepare his disciples for what was soon to happen. *Review briefly the confession of Peter...* Then 8:31 – he told them plainly that He was to be rejected, that He would suffer and die, but would rise again. But they couldn't accept that – Peter even rebuked him for saying such a thing. They could not understand how the Messiah could be put to death.

As the time of His departure comes even closer, Jesus took His three closest disciples up on a mountain and showed them a glimpse of His glory. This seemed to only encourage their thinking that the kingdom must be just around the corner, and that He was wrong about this idea of suffering and death.

As they come down from the mountain they engage in a discussion about what the prophets said about the Messiah, the coming of Elijah and the predictions of the Messiah's suffering ...

Mark records one more incident that occurred as they came back from that mountaintop experience – the healing of a demon-possessed mute boy...

Well, now we come to today's text. By way of introduction, we are told that Jesus and his disciples are on their way back from the mountain through northern Galilee heading toward Capernaum – see v. 33. This was a private time for Jesus and His disciples – once again trying to get through to them what is going to happen to Him when they get to Jerusalem – v. 31.

v. 32 – the disciples were afraid to even ask what He is talking about. Matthew says they were "greatly distressed." Luke tells us that "...it was concealed from them..." Perhaps they didn't really want to know. They were afraid of what they would hear if they ask.

How do you react when confronted with something that could be uncomfortable to know? "Don't tell me, I don't even want to know..."

Illust. – getting my blood sugar level tested last weekend...

Now we get to the real message I want to look at this morning. As Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum a very important issue came to the surface. And this issue reveals what was really on the minds of the disciples at this point. In spite of all that Jesus had said and done to try to prepare them for His coming suffering and death, they were still thinking about the kingdom that they were sure was going to be established any day.

Discuss their question about who is the greatest... Where they will fit in the kingdom – who will get the best "cabinet" positions...

This all leads to Jesus taking them into a time of teaching about what true greatness is all about. And that is where we want to spend our time this morning. In the verses that follow he sets forth a general principle regarding true greatness and follows that up with some lessons – three marks of greatness.

The Principle – “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

In this statement, Jesus never minimizes the desire to be great. He never criticized the disciples for wanting to be distinguished. The real issue was what it means to be great and how is that achieved. His point is that greatness is not measured by position or power. It is not determined by how many people serve me. Rather it is shaped by my willingness to serve – how many people am I serving?

This attitude is the exact opposite of what comes naturally. The natural instinct of the heart is to desire the approval and the applause of men... to be served by others... to exercise power and influence over others... to be looked up to and admired by men.

But Jesus says, the true measure of greatness is seen in our willingness to serve... our desire to go against our natural instincts... to become a servant, seeking the approval and the applause of God. How different those two attitudes are.

Well, then to make his point even more clearly, Jesus provides a living example and illustration. He calls over a young child, puts his arm around him and says to his disciples, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

Ray Stedman pictures it like this, with a bit of speculation. He says:

This is a beautiful scene. I can see it in my mind's eye, as I hope you can -- our Lord, with his arms about this boy. We are not told whose boy it was. But one thing is clear: it was not a child especially prepared for this occasion. It was not a Sunday School boy who had just been taught all the right answers to give; he was just an ordinary lad. He may have been Peter's son, because

this probably took place in the house of Simon Peter, where Jesus made his headquarters in Capernaum. If so, he was doubtless full of the old man, and therefore a rascal. Jesus gathered this little rascal in his arms and, standing there with the boy, he said to his disciples, "Now, true greatness is modeled on this."

Then he proceeds to show us in three ways what we might call “lessons from a child.” He teaches his disciples, and us, what it is that we should be ambitious for. Ambition is not wrong, but it is important to be ambitious for the right things. Here Jesus shows us three important marks of true greatness.

Welcome everyone, with no respect of persons

The first lesson comes from the words of Jesus, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,” The key words are, “**in my name.**” The motive for welcoming a small child is not because of something that unimportant child can do for you, but because it is actually being done as unto the Lord. It is done in his name.

The principle here is that all people need to be recognized as important, whether or not they are able to do anything for us in return. The common principle in the world's value system is, you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. One writer says this about greatness:

“...you [must] learn increasingly to have no respect of persons, to welcome people simply because they are people, to take no consideration of whether they can do something for you or not, and not to be concerned whether knowing them enhances your own prestige, so you can drop their names where it will do you the most good, but simply to be interested in people because they are people, and because, potentially at least, they are sons and daughters of God himself.”

Perhaps unwittingly, this lesson is reinforced by John in the following verses. John refers to someone who is not one of us, not part of our group, so we forbade him from doing the things he was doing. Jesus said, don't stop him, just because he doesn't fit your mold. Encourage him, help him, build him up.

There is certainly a lot more that could be said on this exchange, but I want to go on to the second mark of true greatness...

See the value of every human being

Read vv. 41-42 – note that there is the word “And” at the beginning of v. 42.

I believe Jesus is still sitting there with his arm around this little child. And he is telling us that even the smallest ministry to a young believer, whoever they may be, is not without reward. Even something as simple as a cup of cold water can make a difference to someone, and even change their life.

On the other hand, he goes on to point out that to ignore or neglect or to harm in any way, even the most insignificant person is a serious offence. It would be better to suffer harm ourselves than to bring harm to some young person in Christ. I think Jesus is making clear that sometimes the greatest harm we can do to a child or to a young believer in Christ is simply neglect.

A truly great person is one who sees the value in every human being and treats them as such.

Judge yourself first and deal with your sin

The third mark of greatness follows immediately in vv. 43-50 – read. If we are ever to serve others and see them grow in faith and service, we need to begin by dealing with our own weaknesses and sinfulness. Three times Jesus says we need to deal drastically with those things that are not right in our own life.

The word that is used here for hell is gehenna, *lit. ge-hinnom*. It was the name of a valley outside Jerusalem. It was the place where some of the kings of Israel had offered their children to the god Moloch, to be burned with fire. It was a defiled place, and it became the garbage dump of Jerusalem. Fires smoldered there continuously; repulsive and ugly worms ate at the garbage. It is really the symbol of the eternal waste of life. For the unbeliever, it symbolizes the eternal punishment of hell, of a life completely wasted and destroyed. For the believer, there is the reality that parts of our life may have been wasted.

In order to avoid that waste of our life, Jesus says we need to judge ourselves. As he speaks of the hands, feet and eyes, I think we can relate those to areas of our life – our actions and attitudes:

Hands – speak of what we do – filthy words, sexual sin, lying, stealing... Stop doing those actions that are destroying you. Deal with those actions, cut them off, or you will suffer for it.

Feet – speak of the ways we travel, the circumstances, the paths we take that lead to temptation and sin – Jesus says, change the way you walk, don't go to those places that lead you to sin. Cut them off...

Eyes – speak of the inner life – thoughts, desires, the fantasies, memories, that lead to sin. Again, he says, cut them off, deal with them or they will lead to a waste of your life.

Read v. 50 again and comment briefly.

Conclusion

This passage opened with the disciples arguing over who was the greatest. They were fighting, competing. Jesus challenged their thinking by taking a small child and giving them some lessons.

Wrap up with this summary of these thoughts from Ray Stedman:

“...the marks of greatness in the kingdom of God are these: to learn to treat everyone the same, without respect of persons; to take life and humanity seriously, and be concerned to profit others, to build into their lives and strengthen them, and not harm them or injure them; and to begin to judge with yourself and to deal drastically with the things in your own heart which are wrong. Such a person rises in stature and greatness in the eyes of God, and will be honored before the whole watching world.”

As we conclude, the questions we need to ask ourselves are these:

1. Are there things in my life that need to be dealt with this morning?
2. Am I pursuing true greatness or the ambition of the world for position and power and the accolades of man?
3. Is my life right with God? Or is my life being totally wasted? If you do not know Jesus Christ as Savior that is where you need to begin.