

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VILLA RICA, PCA

The Last Shall Be First

By

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Mark 9:30-37

As the time of Christ's suffering and death drew near he sought time to be in private. He was unwilling for anyone to know about his passing through Galilee. The only explanation is that he was preoccupied with what lay before him. He wanted to prepare his disciples for this too. They had, he knew, great expectations for the future. They thought that all men would welcome the truths he had been teaching them, and they fully expected that in due course he would be acclaimed the Messiah King. When that happened they expected to be held in high esteem too.

So he tells them about the coming bitter end to his ministry. He said, **"The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later."**

He was up-front with them about what was going to take place. But somehow it did not get through to them.

I. Men Hold Mistaken Ideas About Christ's Kingdom

Men find it hard to abandon pre-conceived or pre-received notions or teachings. The disciples were no exceptions. They truly believed that when the Messiah came he would set up a kingdom with headquarters in Jerusalem and that it would usher in a golden age for Israel. This was the current teaching. There was no cross in that teaching. And when he told them about the rejection he was going to face, about the rough and shabby way he was going to be treated, ending in death. It was too hard for them to believe. It didn't fit in with what they believed, and it sounded too horrible and dreadful. They simply didn't understand what he was saying to them, and they were afraid to ask him.

I ask you, why would they have been afraid to ask him? Was it because they supposed he would rebuke them or chide them? Hardly. They had asked him to explain things before. No. I believe they were afraid to ask him because they didn't want to believe it was true. They preferred to shut it out of their minds.

I read in the newspapers about people who don't want to get tested for AIDS or cancer because they are afraid they will find out that they have the disease. They don't want to know. They prefer to be in the dark. These disciples had staked their all on Jesus Christ and now he is telling them that he is headed for a very bad scene, that he is going to be killed. To them that would mean all their hopes and dreams of the future would be dashed to the ground. So they were afraid to ask for more information. They chose instead to talk about what was really on their minds -- themselves and their fortunes and their station in the kingdom of the Messiah.

But they had been talking in private. Christ had not been taken into their confidence. But that doesn't mean he didn't know. He did know and it comes out in his question to them after they came to Capernaum. And the Scripture says, **"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.**

Do you think preachers are all humble and unambitious? Those early disciples who were going to end up as preachers weren't very humble. They were engrossed with how great they would be in Christ's Kingdom. I have seen this among men in the ministry. Men can love the Lord Jesus and still be full of ambition and pride. God has his own ways of taking that out of his servants, but ambition and pride goes along with man's sinful nature. They were trying to decide which among them was going to be great. Remember how James and John went to Jesus with the request that he would do for them whatever they asked. And when he asked them what it was they wanted him to do for them, they said to him, **"Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory."** ³⁸**But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"** ³⁹**They said to Him, "We are able."** And Jesus said to them, **"The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.** ⁴⁰**"But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."**

This episode tells us that there was an ambitious streak in those two brothers. Shall we call this holy ambition? But let us not cover ambition with a robe of piety and righteousness lest we be like the scribes and Pharisees who were used as an example of pride and vanity and all manner of wickedness by Christ. He said of them, ⁵**"But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their** ⁶**phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.** ⁶**"They love the place**

of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, ⁷and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. Matt 23:5-7

In that same 23rd chapter of Matthew he pronounced woes upon them for their hypocrisy and pride and vanity. So we need to be on guard against ambition. Let us be ambitious for Christ. Let us seek for His glory and not our own.

II. Humility Is The Way To Greatness

Although the disciples did not tell him what they had been talking about, no doubt sensing that it was not a proper topic of conversation in His presence, he nevertheless proceeds to give them instruction on how to be great in the kingdom of God. **He called the twelve and said* to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."**

Then he uses a most appropriate illustration of this teaching. He takes a child. He stood him in the midst of them; and he then folded the child in his arms, indicating that the child was approved and blessed, and is closest to him at that moment as compared to any of them.

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."

In Matthew's account we have elaboration of this teaching: ¹ the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ²And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, ³and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴"Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵"And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; Matt. 18:1-5

The very gateway to the kingdom of Heaven is through a child-like trust and a humble acknowledgement of one's own insufficiency. Now a child is not faultless or pure. He is not teaching that you return to innocence. He is teaching that a child is still unsophisticated and doesn't have an ambitious spirit like most grown-ups do. There is still a simple, trusting heart in a child, and the child wants more than anything else acceptance and love. A child is not aspiring to positions of honor and status. A child is not trying to lord it over others. A child is not infected with the germ of ambition, that virus that causes a man to take a census -- that is to number his virtues and graces, accomplishments, resources, and has his heart drawn away from God. Are we proud of our talents? But what have we that we have not received from God? Are we proud of our wisdom or knowledge? A brick falls on our head, a car strikes us on the street and then where is the vaunted knowledge of the mind? Are we proud of our beauty? Are we proud of our riches? A revolution breaks out in the country, and then what becomes of our riches? Should we be tempted, like King David of old, to take a census, let us remember these lines of William Knox,

Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a swift-flitting meteor, a fast flying cloud,
A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave,
He passes from life to his rest in the grave.

A young woman went to her pastor and said, "Pastor, I have a besetting sin, and I want your help. I come to church on Sunday and can't help thinking I'm the prettiest girl in the congregation. I know I ought not think that, but I can't help it. I want you to help me with it."

The pastor replied, "Mary, don't worry about it. In your case it's not a sin. It's just a horrible mistake."

Is not pride the sin of devils--the first born of hell? Is it not that wherein Satan's image doth much consist? And is it to be tolerated in men who are so engaged against him and his kingdom as we are? The very design of the gospel is to abase us; and the work of Grace is begun and carried on in humiliation. Humility is not a mere ornament of a Christian, but an essential part of the new creature. It is contradiction in terms, to be a Christian, and not be humble.

But Christ does tell the disciples the way to greatness. The way to greatness is to take the lowest place, to be last of all and servant of all. The greatest example of this is to be seen in Christ Himself. The cross of suffering and shame was the gateway to the highest exaltation of all.

The Word of God counsels us, ⁵**Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but [□]emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of**

death, even death on a cross. ⁹For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Phil. 2:5-11

We begin the Christian life on a note of humility, a note of repentance for what we have not been, what we have failed to be. And to be great in the Kingdom of God we strive after more humility. We take the lowest seat. We deny ourselves. We become the servant of all, the master of none. We achieve greatness by improving on the humility that commences the Christian life.

Before Abram could become the father of a son he had to experience the embarrassment of having a name that means "father of many" with no children until he was an old man 86 years old. Then he had Ishmael by the slave girl Hagar. And he had to wait 13 more years before he had Isaac by his wife Sarah.

Before David could become king of Israel he had to be an outcast and a fugitive from the wrath of Saul. Before Moses could become a Lawgiver and Deliverer he had to spend forty years on the backside of the desert-tending sheep.

Before God can really use you or me we must experience humility. We must learn to deny ourselves. If God has let you go through humiliation, through trials and sorrow, remember, only the humble and meek and lowly amount to anything in the kingdom of God. He giveth more grace that we might be vessels fit for His use, fit for greatness.

Have you come to Jesus like a child? Have you come to God admitting that you don't have anything to offer Him but that you want Jesus Christ as a Savior from your sins? Have you knelt before him and told him that you are a sinner, unclean and unfit for heaven, but that you are willing to trust him to cleanse you and put a new heart in you and give you the gift of salvation? Come to him at this Thanksgiving season and begin the life of a disciple of Christ? Come to Him who promised to never turn away a single soul who sincerely comes to him for forgiveness of sins and desires to have the gift of the Holy Spirit to live a life of faith unto him.

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Please be gracious to forgive typos and errors of expression. These notes are faithful approximations of what has been preached. May God be glorified in the preaching of His Word.

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