

**Mark 9:30-37**

Everyone knows what is meant by greatness. It's a measuring stick used in every arena of life. If you miss a great football play on television, you don't panic; great plays are always shown again and again from every conceivable angle. Great players stand out from all the rest. That's why Canton, Ohio has a football Hall of Fame, and Cooperstown, New York, a baseball Hall of Fame. There are certain books which we consider to be great. The same thing applies to meals that we eat and to vacations that we take. Some cars get great gas mileage; others don't.

It's one thing, however, for someone, or something, to be called great. It's quite another thing when someone calls themselves great. I will never be a fan of Muhammad Ali, not because he wasn't a great boxer, but because he boasted of being the greatest. To strive for greatness, whether in athletics, music, academics, or in any area of life, is commendable so long as the path to greatness is walked with humility. But when you blow your own horn, announcing to all who will listen, how great you are...one thing has become clear: the greatest thing about you is your ego.

It is a turn-off to be pompous and conceited before other men and women, but to act this way before God is deadly and damning. It's what Jesus' disciples were doing in our text. They were arguing, not about which of them could run the fastest or hold his breath the longest. They were arguing about which one of them was the greatest disciple of Jesus. It's one thing for us in the church to call Peter, James, John, Matthew, Andrew and the other disciples, great. And we do. We honor them even as we thank God for them--for doing great things through them. But it is despicable for great men to speak with pride of their greatness.

Understand what was going on here. For Peter to say, "I'm the greatest," is the same thing as saying, "The rest of you are not as good as me." For John to argue, "I'm the greatest," is to say, "I'm better than the rest of you. Who I am and what I've done is greater than who you are and what you've done." It's sad when people boast of their accomplishments in life. But it's tragic when someone boasts that his or her life before God is noteworthy, is commendable, even great. And this is what the Twelve were doing. They were saying to each other, "Compared to you, I'm great." And their attitude before God was saying, "Look at me, God; I'm better, I'm greater than all the rest." Jesus' disciples had become Pharisees...pompous, conceited Pharisees.

Compare this attitude to that of Jesus. Rather than saying, "All of you are wrong. I'm the greatest. I'm better than all of you put together!"...rather than speak such words, which He could have said, for they would have been true, He was saying, "(I) will be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill (Me)." Jesus, the greatest of all, did not speak of His greatness. Instead, He emptied Himself of His greatness and took the form of a servant, a servant who would suffer and die for sinners like you and me. Even as Jesus' disciples were selfishly stepping on each other, reaching for glory and greatness, Jesus was giving up His glory and greatness, intent on letting others step all over Him as He was reaching, with bloody hands, for a hard, splintery cross.

Now, the Twelve--these pompous disciples arguing about being great--were ashamed when Jesus confronted them. What about you? There isn't one of us who is perfectly humble in how we live. There are people in this world, people in our communities, people in our own families who we think are beneath us. Compared to them, we think we're pretty great. We're better workers, or better givers, or better Christians. We may not broadcast this to any who will listen. We may not argue with others about it. But this pompous, Pharisaical attitude does fill our hearts just as it filled the hearts of the Twelve. And it affects our attitude before God. My fellow sinners, we cannot be full of Christ when

we are full of ourselves. We cannot have a heart of faith when conceit and pride have a home there. Jesus' disciples were arguing about being the greatest disciple. But they were no longer even disciples at all! They had fallen from grace. And so do we, day after day, when we puff ourselves up and turn away from following our Lord.

St. James has some words for us in our Epistle for today: "Humble yourselves before the Lord," he writes, "And He will exalt you." It is not for us to seek greatness before God. It is not for us to lift ourselves up. But rather, we must humble ourselves. We must turn away from ourselves and all that we think is good and great within us. We must repent. If you want to be a Christian...if you want eternal life in heaven, then you must throw yourself into hell. All who strive for heaven by reaching for it, will perish. But those who cast themselves into hell...who confess, "I am a poor, miserable sinner. There is nothing good in me of which I can boast before God. I do not deserve heaven, but I deserve to perish in hell because of how I have lived."--It is such repentant sinners who thus humble themselves, whom God will exalt.

Friends, God does not leave you in hell. He exalts you. He lifts you up out of hell and gives you a place with Him in heaven. He does this not because you deserve it, but because He is full of mercy. He forgives you. This is why Jesus went to the cross to die at the hands of cruel men. He went there for you. He went there to take your place in hell. He went there to suffer everything that your sins deserve. Jesus, who is first in line, first in everything by Divine right for He is God--Jesus went to the end of the line. He gave up His rights. He did not cry out, "That's not fair!" as so many today are doing in our society. Jesus gladly, willingly took the worst, took the lowest, so that you would have the best, so that you, in your Baptism, would have life instead of death, so that your seat for all eternity would be amid the joys and comforts of heaven.

So why do you and I boast before others and before God? There is no need for boasting. God lifts you up in Christ as high as you can go. Jesus went into the depths so that in Him life and salvation would be yours. Since we do not need to exalt ourselves, we can live each day exalting others. We can lift others up. Up out of their despair. Out of their worries. Out of a life filled with guilt and remorse. We can speak of God's mercy to them. We can hold the cross of Christ out before them. We can forgive them where they have wronged us. We can do these things...and here I say with joy you, who are God's people in Christ, are doing these things because you believe in your heart that your God, Jesus Christ, has done, and still does all this for you. Amen.