

Mark 9:33-37

September 22, 2024

What makes someone great? Their accomplishments, right? A great athlete. A great scholar. A great chef. Not everyone who performs on the ballfield, in the classroom, or in the kitchen is considered great. Only a select few are known in this way. To be great you have to excel in what you do. You have to outperform all others.

What makes a great disciple of Jesus? That is the topic of conversation between Peter, James, John, Philip, Matthew, Thomas, and the others. In fact, they do not stop with great. They are bound and determined to identify who of them is the greatest.

Picture their conversation. More of a debate actually, and even a heated argument. What is the standard for greatness that they are using? The disciple who speaks up the most? That would have to be Peter. The disciple Jesus appears to love the most? This could be John. The disciple with the most responsibility? That would be Judas Iscariot. He has been given charge of the moneybag. Each of these twelve disciples is refusing to back down. Each of them putting forth the reason why he should be considered the greatest.

Now, competition can be a healthy thing. And not just out in the world. Also in the church. St. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome that they should “*outdo one another in showing honor.*” Imagine a congregation where the members compete with each other in showing love and honor, in Bible reading and memorizing, in the giving of offerings, and so forth. And isn’t this actually how we should act? Letting our light shine? Being Christian examples to our fellow members so that they strive to match, and even go beyond us in Christian living?

But does that make us great, if we outdo other Christians? Apparently, the twelve disciples think it does. And it is within our sinful nature to think the same way.

Now when Jesus calls the Twelve to Himself, He does not forbid them from striving to be great. What He does is to tell them how they are to strive for greatness. Going to the back of the line rather than putting yourself first. Making yourself a servant of others.

But do we really need Jesus to point this out to us? These same principles are taught by Buddhists, Muslims, and by other religions. The difference between Jesus’ teaching and all the rest lies within the one who teaches. What makes Jesus great? His miracles and other accomplishments? His moral conduct? His wisdom? No!

St. Paul hits the nail on the head (pun intended by the way) with these words to the Philippians: “*Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant...He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*”

Our God is great, not so much because of what He did, as what He did not do. He refused to defend Himself against His attackers. He did not resist when they arrested Him, when they whipped Him severely, when they drove nails into His hands and feet and left Him there to die. But let’s look also at what our eyes are unable to see. Jesus’ greatness is that He accepted freely, and even joyfully, the awful punishment of hell that you and I deserve, because we are the sinners, not Him. And yet He became sin

for us, and we are declared righteous before God. In everything, we see Jesus giving of Himself so that you and I receive, and keep on receiving. This word Jesus uses here in our text: receive. Receiving a child in His name, receiving Jesus, receiving our Heavenly Father by receiving Jesus.

Now there is a wonderful Bible story told by St. Luke which can help us understand all this, this concept of greatness and receiving. It's the account of Mary and Martha in Luke 10. Martha is doing great things in the kitchen. She may, or may not be a great cook, but it's great because she is doing it for Jesus. But Mary, she's sitting down. She is sitting at Jesus' feet listening. Not even lifting a finger to help her sister out in the kitchen. Martha is accomplishing much. She is serving, serving Jesus a meal. But what is Mary accomplishing? Nothing. Not one thing.

Now we're not told that Mary and Martha are arguing here about who of them is the greatest. But suppose this topic came up later. Who do you think would win this argument? Well, Martha would point to her accomplishments in the kitchen. And Mary would have no accomplishments of her own to point to.

And yet, Jesus points to Mary. And He says that what she is doing is the greatest thing of all. It is the "*good portion*," He says, the best, the greatest. Mary is receiving Jesus' teaching with her ears. And no accomplishment in the kitchen is greater than that. Nothing that is done for Jesus is as great as receiving what Jesus does for us. The meals that are served by Christians may be great, especially when done out of love for Jesus. But no meal is greater than the Supper of Jesus' body and blood in which He stoops down to serve us.

Are you a great disciple of Jesus? Do you want an honest answer? I hope so, because that is what we need to hear. Jesus has already cornered the market on greatness. The disciple who strives to be the greatest will find that Jesus already has that title. He emptied Himself. He became nothing. He became the servant of all sinners, taking their place on the cross; yes, our place in hell. We cannot outdo that.

So, here it is. Our measure of greatness, yours and mine, has nothing to do with our accomplishments, with what we do for Jesus. Our greatness consists in what Jesus does for us.

The Twelve were arguing about who was the greatest. But the one who was the greatest of the Twelve wasn't even part of their group yet. He would join them later on when Jesus called him to be His apostle. St. Paul was the greatest of the Twelve because he was the greatest sinner of the Twelve. The "*chief of sinners*," he puts it. But because Paul was a great sinner, Jesus showed great mercy toward him. He forgave him and placed him into service.

And so, again here it is. Do you want to be a great disciple of Jesus? Then become a great sinner. You already are. But be willing to admit it and confess that your sins are great. But then look to the cross and see something much greater than your sinfulness. See your Lord hanging there dying for you. Jesus has great mercy for great sinners. That mercy He extends to you. If you are a great sinner, then you are a forgiven sinner. Absolutely and completely forgiven of all your sins.

There is no need for us to argue about who of us is the greatest, the greatest sinner, because Jesus is a much greater Savior. Amen.