

Jesus Defines Greatness
The Memoirs of Peter
Mark 9:33-37
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Well, we return tonight to Mark 9. And to a fresh set of the teaching of Christ that brings to bear the truth on us as disciples. He begins to address specifically those who already follow Him. You know as I thought about the passage we come to tonight - although I certainly don't agree with those who argue that, at some point in the past, America was a Christian nation in the sense that it was practically the equivalent of the theocracy of Israel. I certainly don't agree with that. Although that is true, it is also true that at one point there was certainly a larger percentage of our leaders and people who were truly Christian. And because of the widespread influence of Christianity in the U.S., there were some repercussions of that in the culture. Even unbelievers didn't do certain things. Didn't openly do certain things. Didn't flaunt those things.

Until about the last 50 years, it was considered a virtue in our country to at least appear to be somewhat humble. But today, all of that has changed. It's hard to trace when it began. In my own life, I can remember certainly one place I remember it being obvious and clear. It was with one of the greatest boxers of all time, Muhammed Ali. Certainly an amazing athlete, he was also a master promoter and marketer. And I think a lot of his bravado had to do with that. It had to do with sort of promoting his next event, his next gig so that more people would want to be there, more money would come in, he would be wealthier. He knew what to say to stir up attention and get people talking about him. And he became known for a particular byline. And when you think of Muhammed Ali, if you know about him at all, you think of this byline. He always said in almost every venue in which he could say it, "I am the greatest." I am the greatest. And I remember thinking in the culture at the time and even unbelievers were a little bit put off by that, a little bit shocked by that because there was this sort of veneer of Christianity that made it still a bit unacceptable to be quite so obvious with your pride. He made it more acceptable, I think, for professional athletes to be self-promoting and openly proud. You know we went from catching a glimpse of a football player on the television saying, "Hi, Mom" to someone who they have to

take the camera away because he's got this string of self-promotion. Over the years, that same thing has trickled down to the entire culture. More than 10 years ago now, MTV produced a special program entitled, "The Seven Deadly Sins." Of course that's a reference, not to a biblical list of sins, but to a list from medieval theology. The seven deadly sins in medieval theology were pride, covetousness, lust, anger, envy and gluttony. And the program was kind of a series of sound bites, summarizing our culture's attitudes today, or now 10 years ago or more, about those things that were once thought to be sins. None of those seven sins were as roundly defended more than pride. One entertainment guru said, "Pride is a sin? I wasn't aware of that." Another popular musician at that time, Ice-T, said, "Pride is mandatory. That's one of the problems of the inner city kids. Kids don't have enough pride. I got into a gang because of pride." Actress Kirstie Alley said, "I don't think pride is a sin. And I think some idiot made that up."

To our self-esteem-drunk culture, pride and self-promotion are friends of our souls, not enemies. No one in our culture wants to be number two. Everybody wants to be number one. This isn't a new problem. This was part of the very first sin. Pride and self-advancement were part of the spontaneous generation of sin in the heart of Lucifer. And it has always been part of the fallen human condition. First-century Israel, when our Lord lived and ministered, was no different. It was a time dominated by pride and rank and self-promotion. So greatness then was defined by those things. It was defined by the rank and order in which you found yourself in society. Your position. And every one fought for the highest place. And if that was the sort of Kool Aid of the times, the disciples had drunk a heavy dose. But life in the kingdom of Christ cuts across the human condition and stands antithetical to it. In the text that we come to tonight in Mark's gospel, our Lord makes that very, very clear.

Now before we look at the specific passage, I want to make sure you understand the context because over the next couple of weeks we're going to be looking at it. The larger context, the larger section begins in Mark 9:33-50. We could call this larger section, "Essential Lessons for Every Disciple." Jesus centers His teaching in the rest of chapter 9 on His disciples. He's teaching *us* lessons. The first lesson come in verses 33 to 37. Look at it with me. Mark 9:33:

They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him Who sent Me.”

The first essential lesson for every disciple is this: True greatness in Christ’s kingdom is defined by humility. You see in the verses that I just read for you our Lord defines greatness. Or more accurately He redefines greatness. He turns on its head the common understanding of greatness of being measured by one’s rank and one’s position.

Now as this passage unfolds before us tonight in verses 33 and 34, we really begin by seeing the persistent enemy of true greatness. Now don’t forget the context. We saw it last week in verses 30 to 32. After some five months of living in Gentile areas, teaching His disciples, ministering to Gentiles, Jesus brought His disciples back to Galilee. He’s been gone for five months and now He’s returned. But He didn’t want anyone to know that He was returning. And so to keep their visit a secret, Matthew implies that Jesus apparently divided up the disciples, there were 13 of them obviously all together, the 12 plus Christ; He divided them up into smaller groups and from Caesarea Philippi He assigned each of them sort of separate routes or at least separate times on the same route and then they regathered somewhere in Galilee. That’s where Jesus told them for a second time about His coming death and resurrection. That’s the context and that brings us to verse 33. Look at it. “They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, ‘What were you discussing on the way?’” Now I’m not going to spend a lot of time here, I just want to remind you of the geographical context. The disciples had come, Jesus and His followers had come from Caesarea Philippi up here in the north down the trade route down to the northwestern side of the Sea of Galilee where Capernaum was located. This is a view from the cliffs of Arbel looking out over the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee and you see Capernaum there circled. This is what it looks like a little closer. The remains of the

synagogue and that strange looking building is a church built over what is almost certainly the original house of the apostle Peter. It's likely that what we read about in this account tonight happened in that location. Very possibly in Peter's home.

All the way back in the first chapter, the great Galilean ministry had begun with Jesus moving, you remember, from Nazareth to Capernaum. He had a house there. We don't know if He lived in Peter's house or if instead He had rented quarters of his own. He didn't own anything. We're told that, but we just don't know. But He lived here for most of His ministry in Capernaum. But now He's done with that Galilean ministry after five months in Gentile areas He comes back to Capernaum but this is the last time Capernaum is mentioned as a place where Jesus was. And it says, "When He was in the house..." Jesus and His disciples remember traveled back; took separate routes. Probably traveled during the day. Arrived in the late afternoon or early evening. It's likely that they would have eaten the dinner meal that was typical for Jewish people at that time. Perhaps after the meal was over we're not told the exact circumstance, but perhaps after the meal was over, Jesus brings up a very painful subject: the issue of what they had been arguing about on the return trip to Capernaum.

Now, how did He know about this? Well, Luke tells us "Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart" Just reminds us that our Lord knows. Our Lord knows what you're thinking right now. And He knows what we're thinking all along. John 2 tells us "He did not need anyone to testify concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man" generally and then Hebrews 4 says "There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." He knew what had been going on in their lives. He knows what's going on in ours. In Revelation 2, Jesus says "All the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts." He did of the disciples as He does for us. So Jesus directly asks, so what were you guys talking about on the way? The Greek word "discussing," by the way, can also mean arguing and it may have that implication here. The tense of the verb implies that this wasn't like a brief discussion. This was like their major topic of conversation on the journey that day. It was constant. It was continuous. A lengthy, ongoing discussion. Jesus said, so what was it? Verse 34, "But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest." The disciples just remained silent. Why? Well, there

you have it. They were embarrassed. You know it's interesting, although they had imbibed so much of the culture around them of rank and position and order, they had learned enough from Christ, and His own manner, His own humbling of Himself, to realize they should be embarrassed by this discussion. So they don't bring anything up. They felt a sense of conviction and guilt.

Now where did this discussion come from? What generated this discussion among the twelve? Well, when you think about where does the sin of self-promotion come from with the disciples, it came from the same place it comes from all of us. It is a natural expression of fallen human pride. You see this throughout the Scriptures. I love the clarity of the expression in 3 John 9. There was this man in the church named Diotrefes and John says he "loves to be first among them" and because of that he doesn't accept what we say. He's promoting himself and he can't do that with truth so he's going to embrace error. But it was all because of his pursuit of the first place. When we think about ourselves it's important to remember that we are all predisposed to want to be great. Think about even kids. You know when kids have their little play and their imagination runs wild and they invent these games and these imaginary situations – when kids put themselves into fairy tales, how many of your kids imagine themselves being the slaves? How many of your kids imagine themselves being the workers who built the castle? No. What do they do? When we imagine ourselves in those scenarios everybody imagines themselves being the king or the prince or the hero or the general or the princess or the queen. This temptation to exalt ourselves over others comes absolutely natural to the fallen human heart. It is an expression, are you ready for this, it is an exact mirror reflection of our father, the devil, before we were saved. He began by exalting himself and trying to exalt himself, even over God his Creator. It comes absolutely natural to the fallen human heart.

There's a second reason this discussion was going on though and the sin was sort of manifesting itself. It was an accepted part of the first-century Jewish culture. One writer describes it like this: "At all points, in worship, in the administration of justice, at meals, in all dealings there constantly arose the question, 'Who was the greater?' and estimating the honor due to each was a task which constantly was fulfilled and felt to be very important." It was just a reflection of what went on in the culture. It was even among the leadership, the spiritual leadership. Turn over to

Matthew 23:5. Jesus here is teaching His disciples. The Pharisees are standing nearby and he castigates them. He says, verse 5, “They do all their deeds to be noticed by men; they broaden their phylacteries....” those were those boxes with the Scriptures on them they bound on their bodies. They took literally the commands of Deuteronomy 6 and they did it to look spiritual. And they “.... lengthened the tassels of their garments....” The Old Testament law required men to wear tassels on their garments to remind them of the law and their duty to keep it. But they lengthened theirs so they would look like they *really* wanted to obey God’s law. “... They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues.” Position and rank and being greater was very important to them. They loved “....respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.” They loved titles. This was just an accepted part of the first-century culture. These were the spiritual leaders, folks. These were the ones setting the standards, setting the example. Look over at Luke 14. Jesus here watches something unfold and He speaks to it. Luke 14:7.

“And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, ...”

He watched this unfold. They’re having a dinner and they’re sort of jockeying for the best seat, the seat of the greatest honor.

.... saying to them, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this man,’ and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you were invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will have honor in the sight of all those who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus uses a typical meal pattern of behavior among them to teach them a deep spiritual lesson. But He’s reflecting here the culture in which they all lived. In the writings of some of the Rabbis,

they often comment on the seating order in paradise. They argued that the especially righteous people would sit closer to the throne than even the angels. So the disciples have seen this even in their spiritual leaders and they have drunk deeply of this spirit of self-importance themselves. It was part of the culture.

Folks, is that not part of our culture as well? The same pursuit of personal greatness is pervasive in our culture. You see it in subtle ways. I was thinking of this, I told you, when I was together with those other pastors and we were having a little time together. We were talking about social media. One of the issues we discussed and you know some of the appeal of social media, and don't misunderstand me – I'm not being anachronistic; I'm not saying there's no value to it; I'm not sticking my head in the sand; there certainly is – but some of the appeal of social media is narcissism. To promote oneself. You assume that there are really a lot of people out there who care what you're eating right now. Or wearing right now. Or doing in any given moment. I hate to tell you this; they don't. But that's the sell. It's like, 'There are people who are really interested in my life! They care!' The byline on Twitter is "Right now this person is doing this!" For too many Christians under the guise of keeping their friends and family informed, they post on their Facebook self-promoting, narcissistic comments that are merely intended to make themselves look good. It is absolutely a part of our culture and as Christians we're tempted to do the same thing. To try to make ourselves look great.

There was another factor that had contributed to this discussion among the disciples. It had been awakened in them by recent circumstances. You really do have to understand a little of the context to appreciate what's going on here. Because you remember that back in Mark 8:29, Peter had spoken for the group and had acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah, you remember that? He is the Messiah. You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We all believe that, Lord. And Matthew tells us that at the same time Jesus said something to Peter. This is what He said to him. This is heady stuff. "I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." You all know the wordplay here. He's basically saying that on the confession of Me as Messiah and Lord I will build the church. And of course the apostles have a part of that, Peter along with the rest of them. So that was pretty well singling Peter out. That was heady stuff. In addition to that, Jesus had singled out Peter,

James and John for a unique privilege. Back in chapter five, He took just them with Him for that healing. But look back at Mark 9:2. We read, “Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them.” They had gotten picked. Hand-picked by Christ out of the twelve. In addition, Jesus had told the three that He took on the mountain not to tell what they had seen. Now folks, you know how human nature works. You’ve seen it in yourself. After the disciples were alone and just there by themselves, the twelve now reassembled after the mount of transfiguration. What are the other nine going to say? “So, what happened on the mountain? What exactly did Jesus do? What did He teach? What did He say? What went on up there?” And you can just see the three loving this moment. “Sorry, we can’t tell you. Jesus swore us to secrecy. It was amazing! You would never believe it! But we can’t tell you.” And remember all of this comes on the heels of the nine who’d been left down the mountain not being able to cast out the demon out of that boy. So it’s all sort of coming to bear. Can you see this? Can you put yourself in that environment? So now Jesus is not with them, they’re walking down from Caesarea Philippi back to Capernaum and they’re at each other. Well, you think you’re something just because you got to go up the mountain. And on it goes.

The three were feeling heady and the others were feeling angry and resentful. But that’s not all. Once they got back to Capernaum just before this conversation Mark doesn’t tell us but Matthew tells us that Jesus sent Peter out to catch a fish and in that fish’s mouth there was going to be sufficient money to pay the temple tax for Jesus and Peter. All those events then would have had Peter and James and John puffed up with pride at their opportunities and their privileges and the other nine in turn were completely resentful. And this, by the way, didn’t go away. This continues to be a problem. In fact a few months later James and John, and we’ll get there, come with their mother jockeying for the highest positions in the kingdom. And they’re serious. And on the night before the crucifixion, a few months after the account we’re reading here, they’re still having this same argument. They’re arguing about who was the greatest. So in that context with all of that having happened, Jesus says, “So guys, what were you talking about on the way down?” They stayed silent. Eventually, Matthew tells us that they asked Jesus a question about this. Matthew 18, after the silence, after nobody wants to say anything, later in some context they say, “So, Jesus tell us this. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Sounds like a

reasonable question, doesn't it? But it was a whitewashed version because Luke tells us here's what was really going on: "An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest." But the real issue wasn't which one of them was the greatest by their definition. The real issue was their definition of greatness.

So verse 35, our Lord steps in to redefine what greatness really is: "Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.'" Now in the first part of that verse when Jesus sits down, He doesn't do this because He's tired. If you look at other settings where this happens in Matthew 5:1 and other places, you'll see that Jesus here is intentionally assuming the role of a Rabbi teaching His disciples. This is serious. Jesus has a pronouncement He wants to make. He has something serious He wants them to understand. He sat down. And then He called the twelve and He began to teach them. Notice what He says in verse 35, "If anyone..." Now why is that important? Because it's clear here that He isn't just talking to the twelve. This is a universally true principle. It's true of you, it's true of me, it's true of anyone. "If anyone wants [that is, wishes or wills] to be first, [if you want to be first, that is, to be the greatest, to have the highest rank or position in my kingdom, if that's what you're after] he shall be..." That is, he must deliberately choose to be. You want to be the greatest in My kingdom? Then you must deliberately choose to be – and I love the word order in the Greek text. Literally the Greek text says: if that's what you want then of all, last and of all, servant. Of all, last. This runs so contrary to the human heart and to our culture. Whenever you see athletes on television, what's the universal symbol? We're number one! Being number one is as American as apple pie and Chevrolet. This is even contrary to the well-intentioned website campaign, "I Am Second." You know what Jesus says? Try 'I Am Last.' See if that catches on. I am last. And, of all, servant. Now it's interesting here because Jesus doesn't use the Greek word for slave. Instead He uses the Greek word for deacon. It was commonly used of those who waited tables. It described a person whose job was to provide for the needs of others. Someone who willingly served others in a domestic sort of way. Of this role, of the deacon, of this word deacon, Plato wrote, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?" That's the thinking of the world. Jesus says if you want to be the greatest in My kingdom you've got to turn everything you've learned about greatness on its head and you must be of all, last and of all, servant.

This idea of being a willing servant of others was a constant topic of our Lord's. Just turn to one passage. Turn over a page or two to Mark 10. I alluded to this, we're going to get there. Mark 10:35. "James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of You.'" Of course we know the mother was the sort of spokesperson. "He said to them, 'What do you want Me to do for you?' [And] they said to Him, 'Grant that we might may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory.'" And we'll talk about where that request would come from. What would ever motivate them to do that? "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?' They said to Him, 'We are able.' And Jesus said to them, 'The cup I drink you shall drink.'" In other words, you're going to die. You're eventually going to give your life as well for the gospel and "You shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. 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." By My Father. Well, you can guess what's going on with the rest of the guys. "Hearing this [verse 41] the ten began to feel indignant with James and John." Jesus is going to use this as a teaching moment. "Calling them to Himself Jesus said to them, 'You know that all those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them...' they have position, rank, "... their great men exercise authority over them.'" That's how greatness is defined among the Gentiles and its rulers. "But it is not this way among you." Don't let that happen in My kingdom. "Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." So Jesus punctuates this at various points in His ministry.

Now, He's told them the truth. Now He's going to illustrate it. If you were going to illustrate the spirit of humility, how would you have chosen to do it? Jesus does so, I think, in a most unusual way. Jesus gives us a living illustration of true greatness. Verse 36, "Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them..." Now Jesus is going to enact a parable here in the house. He calls a child over to Him. Now a child in this setting was a great illustration for Jesus to use, because in the language Jesus and His disciples mostly spoke, Jesus probably spoke three languages; Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. But the primary language that he

spoke was Aramaic. And the word in Aramaic for child and servant was exactly the same word. So there's a great illustration here. So He calls this child over. This may well have happened in Peter's home there in Capernaum. It's possible after dinner that Jesus even called over one of Peter's children. We don't know. And at first, Luke tells us the child stood there next to Him. The child came running to Jesus and stood next to Him, and then Jesus took the child in His arms. I love the tenderness of Jesus that He constantly showed toward children. We'll encounter it again in chapter 10. By the way, that's not how His culture thought of children. Children, in that first-century Jewish culture, were considered to be barely members of society. Infant mortality rates and death were very high. You needed workers, not those who needed help and needed workers to assist them. So children, therefore, occupied the very last place in importance and prominence in the Jewish culture. They were the last. They were the bottom in terms of greatness and respect.

So, Jesus calls this child over. And then Mark says that Jesus, the Greek word literally implies that Jesus held the child in the bend of His arm. So, this is a small child, old enough to stand and walk, but young enough to be held. And our Lord proceeds to use that child as an object lesson. Now, this is often misunderstood. Jesus is not saying that we ought to copy the character of a child. Children can be very proud. That isn't Jesus' point at all. Jesus, instead, is using the child's status as an illustration. As I said in that culture the child was the lowest rung of the social order. A child has no accomplishments, no status, and therefore no rank or no position. Nothing to offer. They're at the bottom. And Jesus is going to use that. One author writes, R.T. France, a commentator on this passage: "The child represents the lowest order in the social scale. The one who is under the authority and care of others." Specifically, Jesus uses this child to make three points. Three lessons. The first two are not recorded by Mark. They're only recorded by Matthew and I won't take long with them, but I want you to see them because they're very important.

The first lesson Jesus uses this child to teach is that Christ's kingdom can only be entered in humility. Listen to what Matthew says. He quotes Jesus. Matthew 18:3, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Here, He's not talking about life in the kingdom of heaven. He's talking about how to enter the kingdom of heaven. How to get in. And He says if you're going to get in, you've got to get in

like this child. In other words, you have got to come to the place where you have no merit, no accomplishments, no position, no rank to argue that you ought to get in. You have nothing to offer. It's like He said in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the [beggars] in spirit" that's literally what the text says. "Blessed are the *beggars* in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." You get into the kingdom of Christ by coming with nothing in your hand, nothing to offer. You come as a beggar. And until you're ready to come to Christ that way He'll not receive you. He only receives those who come as beggars, with nothing to offer. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Your cross I cling." I have no merit, I have no accomplishments, I have no good works, I have nothing to offer You, Jesus. I'm coming to You begging. That's how you enter the kingdom. In the parable that Jesus told of the publican (the tax gatherer) and the Pharisee, He says this about the tax gatherer, "I tell you, this man went [down] to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." In this context, He's talking about salvation. The tax gatherer went to his house justified because he humbled himself before God. Because he beat on his chest and said "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." He was a beggar before God. Jesus says that's how you get in. It's just like a child who has nothing to offer you. You have to give Him everything. And if you want into My kingdom that's how you get in.

A second lesson that Jesus uses this child to teach – this also is found in Matthew: true greatness in Christ's kingdom can only be measured by humility. In Matthew 18:4, He says, "Whoever then humbles himself as a child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Now we're not entering the kingdom of heaven, we're already in and we're measuring greatness for those who are in. And He says true greatness is measured by humbling yourself as a child. In other words, not touting your rank and position and accomplishments. Not trying to promote yourself to the first place. But instead coming with no accomplishments, nothing to offer, simply living in humility. It's like Romans 12:10, "Give preference to one another in honor." Don't misunderstand this by the way. Jesus is not doing away with positions of authority. In other passages, He establishes rank and authority. He's talking about an attitude, a disposition that we all must have whether we are in authority or under authority.

But the third lesson is the one I want you to see most because it's the one that Mark points out and Matthew does as well. But it's this. True greatness in Christ's kingdom is demonstrated in serving Christ by serving the lowest. Notice what He says in verse 37, "Whoever receives one child like this ..." and here's the key, "... in My name" In other words, as if they're doing it for Me. It's done not for their own glory, not for their own achievement, not for their own merit but for Me. It's in My name. "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me." Matthew puts it like this. "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me." Basically the same. This point is made in other places. But what is Jesus saying here? Jesus says whoever receives one child like this. In other words, whoever receives children and those who, like children, have only littleness and unimportance in society. To receive is to welcome. In other words, Jesus is saying this: whoever openly welcomes and serves a person who is at the lowest end of the social ladder, the lowest, the weakest, the most despised, but does so in Jesus' name, Jesus says it's like that person was openly welcoming and serving Me. And to welcome and serve Me, Jesus says, is to welcome and serve God the Father. So out of a love and concern for Jesus Christ, if you openly welcome and serve the person who is at the bottom of the ladder of human greatness, in Jesus' mind, it's as if you were welcoming and serving Him. And in the Father's mind, it's as if you were welcoming and serving Him. As one author says, "the humblest act of kindness sets off a chain reaction that shakes heaven itself." If it's done in Jesus name. If it's done for Him. And as unto Him.

Of course the passage that makes this so clear is Matthew 25. Turn over there with me. Matthew 25:34. This is a description of judgement. Verse 34 says, "The King will say to those on His right, 'Come you who are blessed of My Father....'" That's the key, not their works by the way. It's that they have been blessed, they have been chosen by the Father. He set His love upon them ".... inherit the kingdom [that was] prepared for you from the foundation of the world." In other words, that's really why they're getting in; not their good works. But their works manifest the reality of who they are. Verse 35, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat." Now imagine the scene. Jesus on the throne of judgement. People standing in front of Him,

“I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, [watch this] even the least of them, you did it to Me.”

Greatness in God’s kingdom, in the kingdom of Christ, is not reserved merely for those who are the gifted and the privileged. Instead, greatness is for any believer and for every believer who in the common and simplest tasks of life serve others. Indeed as one writer says, “The more common and humble the task, the greater the deed.” This child was a great living illustration. Not the child’s character, but the child’s status. He had nothing to offer and Jesus said if you will humble yourself to serve those who have nothing to offer, who have no rank, no greatness, no position, but you will do it as unto Me, I will think of it as unto Me. And the Father will think of it as unto Him.

But there’s another living illustration of the spirit of humble service in this text and it’s even greater than that of the child. It’s that of our God. Because our God is the one who served us by what? Sending His Son. William Hendrickson writes and you don’t need to read the whole quote I just want you to look at the end of it. He says, “The greatness in the kingdom reflects the same quality which in an infinite degree resides in God. God is only encouraging us to act like He acts.” What did Isaiah say in Isaiah 57:15,

For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I will dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

This is our God. This is what He does to us. And He's merely telling us to do this to others. But it's not just our God who is the illustration of this humble service. It's also His Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Look over in Mark 10 again. Notice the last verse after Jesus confronts James and John and all the disciples. He says in verse 45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Ultimately, the greatest demonstration of this humble spirit of service was the cross. It was His coming and living and dying. And Paul uses this very model of our Lord, His model of humble service, as a challenge to all of us. Look at Philippians 2 as we finish our time together. Philippians 2. You remember this? Verse 3, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit." To advance yourself something that's just going to be for your own benefit, to build up your reputation, to be great "... but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves." Think of the people around you as more important than you are. And when you do that, then you will not "merely look out for your own personal interests, but [you'll also look out] for the interests of others." If they're really more important than you, then their interests are more important than your interests. He's not telling us not to take care of those duties and responsibilities we have. That comes naturally; we do that. He's saying don't merely look out for your own personal interests. But for the interests of others and then He turns it to the pattern. Verse 5. Let me tell you what that looks like.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be [held onto, to be kept at all costs; but rather He emptied Himself, and took] the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

There was Christ's example. The cross. And you know what? The only way we will ever get to a spirit of humble service, like Christ is commanding us to here, is by contemplating what He did at the cross. Because that is what compels us. Lloyd-Jones writes and I love this,

I am told that I am to esteem others better than myself and there is only one thing that can make me do that. There is only one thing I know of that crushes me to the ground and humiliates me to the dust. And that is to look at the Son of God and especially to contemplate the cross. Nothing else can do it. When I see that I am a sinner and that nothing but the Son of God on the cross can save me, I am humbled to the dust. I say that no one can be worse than I am. I am the chief of sinners and anyone must be better than I am. Nothing but the cross can make a man esteem others better than himself. Nothing but the cross of Christ can give us the spirit of humility.

Isaac Watts, the great hymn writer, put it like this, “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride.”
Let’s pray together.

Father, thank You for this passage. Thank You for the lesson from our Lord. Not only what He taught, but the lesson of how He lived; the example, the model of what it looks like. He who was the greatest of all, who stooped to serve the least of all. Lord help us to follow His pattern. Help us to pursue greatness by being at the end of the line. And by being the person who humbly serves the daily needs of others in His name. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.