

“The Greatest!”

Mark 9:30-41 ¹

One of the nice things about life in the military is that you always know what to wear. In the Navy, at least, and I suspect that it's true for every service, a “uniform of the day” is stipulated every single day, and there are very clear guidelines about how to wear it. You never have to worry about whether this is “short-sleeve weather” or “long-sleeve weather.” You never have to worry about being over-dressed or under-dressed. And best of all, everything always matches!

Another very handy thing about the military is that badges of rank and status are very clearly defined, and you can tell from thirty feet away whether an approaching person should salute you or whether this person is entitled to your salute. Even the ways in which persons speak and write to each other are very clearly defined depending on relative rank and status. Some make fun of this dimension of military life, but it's actually quite helpful and efficient.

All of us have to deal with rank and status issues, of course, but in the absence of military uniforms and protocols, we have to work harder at it. I suppose hospitals have the most organized system that most of us encounter in daily life. The dress code of any hospital clearly defines rank and status for those who know how to read it. Academic professionals would be another example.

In the realm of business, rank and status is suggested by clothing, office location, signs on doors, automobiles, and in many other ways. When we served in Bristol, Virginia, there were four levels of golf courses that were organized to identify social position, and I imagine that the DC area has so many status differentiators that it would boggle the mind. To some extent, people even choose the church they attend for social reasons. Some folks think that by attending the First Baptist Church rather than the XYZ Baptist Church, they signal to others subtle distinctions of rank and status.

This whole rank-and-status thing seems pretty well ingrained in human nature, and it does have a certain level of utility . . . but it's quite often a problem as well. The New Testament tells us that Jesus' disciples argued more than once about which of them would get the highest positions in what they imagined to be the increasing prominence of the Messianic Party in Jewish political affairs. That happened again in this morning's text, and, as was often the case, Jesus turned their expectations on their heads.

Jesus has now told the disciples that He will soon be killed in Jerusalem. They have seen Him Transfigured into heavenly glory, and and they have just watched Him exorcize an obstreperous demon from a boy. Now the group was headed south through Galilee, keeping as low a profile as they could manage. Jesus was bringing His Galilean ministry to an end, and He needed every moment that remained to give His final teachings and instructions to the Twelve.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 8, 2018. Parallel passages are Matthew 18:1-5 and Luke 9:43b-50.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

As often happens with us when we have some big test or trial ahead, Jesus was becoming more and more preoccupied with the confrontations that were coming in Jerusalem. As this morning's text begins, Jesus has just told the disciples a second time that He was about to be killed, and He had added the new and troubling information that He would be betrayed to this death. One would think that the disciples would immediately turn their attention to this new and unexpected danger of betrayal, but that didn't happen.

Imagine that you have just struggled to tell your Sunday School class that you've been diagnosed with a dreaded disease and probably have only a few weeks to live. But rather than offer support and prayer, the class president responds, "Oh, that's nice. Now who's bringing the potato salad to the class picnic?"

Or imagine that you've just tearfully told your mother that you have cancelled your engagement and called off your imminent wedding. But rather than embracing you, she responds, "Oh, that's nice. Let's talk about the flowers and the centerpieces."

That's pretty much what the disciples did to Jesus. They completely ignored what He had told them and engaged in an intense argument about who was the greatest among them and who would get what job in the Cabinet once Jesus had established His Kingdom.

This argument continued for some time as the group walked along toward Capernaum. Jesus knew what they were doing, but they had apparently separated themselves from Him a little bit while they argued, so that He could plausibly ask them later what they had been arguing about.²

Embarrassed and ashamed, the disciples didn't answer, so Jesus sat down and called the Twelve to come close. Mark tells us that this conversation took place in a house in Capernaum, perhaps Peter and Andrew's house (cp. 1:29), where they had been many times before.

They hadn't told Jesus what they had been arguing about, but since He knew, anyway, Jesus spoke to the point of their disputation: "*If anyone wants to be first—if he wants to be "the Greatest"—he must be last and servant of all.*" And after this opening salvo, Jesus further shocked His disciples by calling a child to stand beside him—perhaps Peter's own child. Then He told them, "*Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but him who sent me*" (Mark 9:35, 37).

It's difficult for us in our child-centric culture to sense how dramatic this moment really was. In those days, children were not highly regarded. They were not thought of as especially innocent, pure, trusting, obedient, or humble. Caring for children was "women's work," and men who were competing for powerful Cabinet positions would have had no time for children—either then or now.

The point Jesus was making had to do with caring for people whom others regard as insignificant, unimportant, and unworthy of attention or effort. It was the same point He made elsewhere when He told His followers that "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me*" (Matthew 25:40).

Up to this point, Jesus' disciples have understood themselves to be increasing dramatically in social status. Each of them had come from a very humble social background,

² Satan is quite well practiced at causing followers of Jesus to bicker among ourselves, disrupting the unity of the Body, distracting us from the real battle, and destroying the testimony of the Church in the world. We have to be smarter than our enemy!

but as Jesus increased in notoriety and public acclaim, they who rode His coattails increased in status, too—or so they imagined it.

You're probably aware of the acronym "RHIP"—"rank has its privileges." The higher we rise in any human pecking order, the more perks and options we have, and the more people we tend to have around us whose job is to look after our every whim. Jesus was turning this idea on its head, essentially telling the disciples that the rule among *them* must be "RYIP"—"rank *yields* its privileges."

Jesus would demonstrate this most powerfully when He washed the disciples' feet at the Passover meal not many days hence, and Paul, reflecting on the whole experience of the Incarnation some years later, wrote that Jesus, *though he was God, did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross*" (Philippians 2:5-8).

As He instructed His disciples, Jesus told them that those who are **truly great** don't get puffed up about rank and status but use rank and status as a platform from which to serve others—and He practiced what He preached. Paul later wrote extensively about the idea that those who are mature in Christ will give up privileges they would otherwise enjoy if this will benefit, serve, encourage, and strengthen others in the Body of Christ (cp. Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 13).

The disciples were conceptualizing greatness in terms of human power, position, and glory rather than in terms of God's righteousness and sacrificial Love. Jesus essentially told them that "comparison is a cancer," and that they should try to outdo one another, not in pomp and circumstance, but in kindness and service toward those the world regards as insignificant.

To the disciples' disappointment and chagrin, Jesus told them that from here on out, caring for the very people they were disregarding and disrespecting was the path to greatness. "To welcome this child," Jesus told them, "is to welcome me; and to welcome me is to welcome my Father. *This is important,*" He said. "DON'T MISS THIS!"

What happened next would be funny if it weren't so sad. It was another "Oh, that's nice; so who's bringing the potato salad?" moment.

John—the "beloved disciple," but also one of the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17)—got the point, didn't like it, and quickly changed the subject . . . back to their previous argument about who was "the greatest": "*Teacher,*" he said, "*we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us.*"

Whoever this person was, he was apparently a follower of Jesus, but not among the Twelve. Through Jesus' power, this man was apparently successful in his exorcism efforts, which galled the disciples after their recent and humiliating failure to cast the demon out of the boy. But worst of all, this fellow had apparently not given the Twelve what they thought was their due—"He wasn't following US"—and so they had tried to squelch his work.

The disciples were still trying to be "Special." They wanted to preserve what they saw as their privileged position in a select circle, and they didn't want to share their status with anyone. They wanted exclusive rights to Jesus' Name and Power, as if they had a patent or a copyright on "Jesus, Inc."

But before we "get up on our high horses" and talk about how awful they were, we need to remind ourselves about the many ways we do the same thing today. As just one example,

it's awfully easy for churches to become jealous of other churches who seem to be reaching more people, building bigger buildings, or gathering fancier musical groups, rather than celebrating their success as the advancement of God's Kingdom.

Jesus was unimpressed with and undistracted by John's objection: "Don't stop him. He's on our team. And you're going to need all the help you can get."³

This is yet another sad example that we humans, left to ourselves, are much, much better at building walls between ourselves than we are at building bridges. The rich lord it over the poor, the educated lord it over the less educated, adults lord it over children, men lord it over women, whites lord it over everyone else, and the list goes on and on and on.

"It is not to be so among you," Jesus said to the Twelve. "It is not to be so among you," Jesus says to us.⁴

Jesus' concluding statement in this morning's text is also quite interesting: "*For whoever is not against us is for us. And whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you belong to Christ—truly I tell you, he will never lose his reward.*"

First of all, "*whoever is not against us is for us*" is not a new, watered-down route to salvation. Neutrality and ambivalence will not get anyone into God's Kingdom. The only gate, the only door, the only way in has always been and will always be faith in Jesus.⁵ "*No one comes to the Father except through me,*" Jesus told us (John 14:6).

In "*whoever is not against us is for us,*" Jesus was building on the idea of "Don't stop him. You're going to need all the help you can get." Jesus knew that persecution and martyrdom were coming; and in situations of severe persecution, abstaining from persecution is kindness. It's in that sense that Jesus spoke about the cup of water, too.

He was referring to those who not only abstain from persecution but who offer encouragement and comfort to those who are being persecuted. Examples of this would have been neighborhood folk in Selma or Montgomery or Birmingham or Memphis who literally offered cups of cold water to those who marched past. That's what Jesus was talking about.

But the main idea in this text doesn't have to do with persecution. It has to do with servanthood. The main idea is that those who want to be "The Greatest" must willingly and gladly choose to be the servants of all—especially those who are dismissed by others as insignificant.

John Calvin was a brilliant theologian and one of the central figures of the Protestant Reformation; but fearing that some might wish to make his grave some sort of shrine, he gave strict instructions that his grave should be in the common cemetery with no tombstone. To this day, no one knows where John Calvin is buried.⁶ That's what Jesus was talking about.

Martin Luther, also a brilliant theologian and also one of the central figures of the Protestant Reformation, wrote that "God creates out of nothing. Therefore, until a man is nothing, God can make nothing out of him."⁷ That's what Jesus was talking about.

³ Cp. Numbers 11:26-29.

⁴ Cp. Luke 22:26; James 2:1-7.

⁵ Matthew 7:13; John 3:3; 14:6.

⁶ "John Calvin," in *Christian History*, no. 12.

⁷ Martin Luther, in "Martin Luther: The Early Years," *Christian History*, no. 34.

John Wesley was a powerful preacher and the founder of Methodism, and he made rather a lot of money along the way; but wishing to “do all the good I can, everywhere I can, for as long as I can,” he gave all his money away to the poor, and he died with only a few dollars to his name.⁸ That’s what Jesus was talking about.

Mark Hatfield of Oregon was one of the most influential persons in the U.S. Senate for several decades; and he was well-known for staying after meetings at his church, the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, to stack chairs, put away tables, and pick up trash.⁹ That’s what Jesus was talking about.

Graeme Keith, a lifelong friend of Billy Graham, was on an elevator with Dr. Graham when another man in the elevator recognized him: “You’re Billy Graham, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am,” Billy said.

“Well,” the man said, “you are truly a great man.”

Dr. Graham responded, “No, I’m not a great man. I just have a great message.”¹⁰ That’s what Jesus was talking about.

Go and do likewise.

Amen, and Amen.

⁸ www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1987/winter/8711027.html

⁹ Howard Hendricks, “The Problem of Discrimination,” *Preaching Today* tape no. 76.

¹⁰ Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Zondervan, 2005).