

SLIDE 1. Series: Who Is this Man?: A Study of the Gospel of Mark

Teaching: *The Greatest, the Least, and the Richest.*

Sunday April 20, 2025

HAPPY EASTER.

Which is to say this... May you know and remember the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ – esp. on this day – which we celebrate every year – Christ’s victory over sin and death – and He – inviting us to follow Him in that way – and in a way of life right now that is representative of that victory – a life that is grounded in tough realities – but a life that is filled with joy – because we live it by His example, grateful for His work to restore us and our relationship with the One (God) who made us and loves us, and empowered by His Spirit in us – filled with joy because – unlike happiness – joy does not depend on our circumstances – joy puts our circumstances in perspective.

But, to say that, well – that’s wordy!

Maybe even a bit pedantic :)

So... HAPPY EASTER.

Let’s dive back into the gospel of Mark – who poses the question throughout his letter – “Who is this Man, Jesus?” – leaving it to the religious leaders of his day, the curious crowd at the time, and now – us – his readers - to decide.

SLIDE 2. We’ll take a quick peek at **Mark 9:33-35 – Who is the greatest? / Mark 9:36-37; 10:13-16 – Who are the Least? / Mark 10: 17-22 – Who are the richest?**

THE GREATEST

Jesus repeatedly told His disciples what was going to happen to him – which is to say – what kind of king He was and what kind of kingdom He would lead.

SLIDE 3. He literally had just said to them: ***The Son of Man*** (referring to Himself) ***is being betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after He is killed, He will rise three days later*** (Mk. 9:31).

And then – as if they hadn’t even heard Jesus – or if they did – it seems like they heard it in this spirit, “O, that’s nice Jesus. Thanks for the heads up!” – because they then immediately proceeded to argue about who would be the greatest / who would be the chief minister of Jesus’ earthly kingdom!

So... Jesus is on route to the Cross.

His disciples are arguing about who would be the greatest.

And they *knew* in their hearts they were wrong to do so.

When Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about – they had nothing to say. It was the silence of embarrassment and shame.

They had no defense.

SLIDE 4. It's interesting how things are given perspective and seen for their true character when they are set before the eyes of Jesus.

As long as they thought that Jesus wasn't listening to them and that Jesus hadn't heard or seen them arguing – the argument about who would be the greatest seemed fair enough – but when that argument had to be made before Jesus – it was seen for all its - wrongness.

Imagine if we took everything we did and said and set it before the eyes of Jesus – what a difference it would make! If we asked, "Could I go on doing this if Jesus was watching me?" If we asked, "Could I go on talking like this if Jesus was listening to me?" If we asked, "How would I defend what I am doing or saying if Jesus heard or saw it?"

O the things we'd be kept from doing or saying!

And yet the fact remains – for those of us who love and follow Jesus - there is no *if* about it. All the things we do and say are done in His presence.

May we pray, "Lord, keep us from doing and saying things that we would feel ashamed for You to see and hear. And thank You for Your forgiveness when we do."

Jesus took this very seriously.

It says that He sat down and called the 12 to Him.

He sat down!

When a Rabbi was teaching, as a master teaches his disciples/his students, when he was really trying to make a point, he sat down to teach. This is what Jesus did here – He took up the position of a Rabbi teaching his pupils before He spoke.

And then He told them that if they sought greatness – in His Kingdom – they would find it – not by being first but by being last, not by being masters but being servants, not by taking but by giving.

It's not that Jesus was against ambition per se – He just redirected it, He redefined it.

For the ambition to be first in line – He redirected His disciples to be the last in line – to not seat yourself at or near the head of the table. For the ambition to have things done for us - He substituted the ambition to do things for others. For the ambition to accumulate more and more - He substituted sharing from what we have.

Here's why – because really great men and women – those who are remembered for making a real contribution to life – are those who said – not, “How can I use my position and those around me to further my own ambition and prestige?” but “How can I use my gifts and role to serve others?!”

This is why we remember Boaz (in the book of Ruth) who let Ruth pick excess grain from his field (and ordered his workers to drop grain for her) and fed her. This is why we remember the Good Samaritan who – even though he was an hated outsider - took care of the poor and beaten traveler. This is why we remember Mother Theresa who gave her life to serve the destitute and the poor of Calcutta, India.

This is the way of Jesus.

THE LEAST

SLIDE 5. And He uses a little child – the least in His midst - to make the point. He turns ambition and greatness upside down.

He took that child in His arms and said: ***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*** (Mk. 9:37).

A child doesn't advance a person's career. A child doesn't enhance a person's prestige. A child doesn't give us things. It's the other way around! A child needs things. A child has to have things done for him or her. A child requires management.

So Jesus is saying, “If we welcome the poor, ordinary people, the people who have no influence and no wealth and no power, the people who need things done for them, we are welcoming Him. More than that – we are welcoming God!”

The ambition and greatness of a person of God, then, is to seek these kinds of people and offer up these ways of humility and service and of sharing what we have.

There is a caution here for us. It's easy to cultivate the friendship of someone who can do things for us – and equally easy to avoid those who can't do things for us. It's easy to seek the favor of the influential and the great – and equally easy to neglect the simple, humble, ordinary person. It's easy to hang out with notable folks at a gathering – and equally easy to avoid the poor nobody.

In effect, Jesus is saying here that we ought to seek out those for whom we can do things.

SLIDE 6. He says much the same at a different time – as Matthew records it in his gospel: ***Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me*** (Mt. 25:40).

This is the way of greatness!

So Jesus allowed the little children to come to Him (Mk. 10:13-16).

It would've been natural for Jewish mothers at the time to seek the blessing of a great and distinguished Rabbi for their children – esp. on their first birthday. Maybe this was just such an occasion.

Whatever the reason – this scene is made more poignant for what was on Jesus' mind – the Cross. It's cruel shadow could never have been far from this thoughts. And yet He made time to take children into his arms – to smile into their faces – to bless them - and maybe even to play with them awhile.

Jesus cared for children and children seemed to care for Him. They went to Him. And so He couldn't have been a gloomy or stern sort. Kids don't go for that! He must have smiled easily and laughed joyously. He – at least – made it easy for them to come to Him.

Somewhere Scottish author and minister, George Macdonald says that he doesn't believe in a man's Christianity if the children are never to be found playing around his door (**The Daily Bible Study: The Gospel of Mark**, *William Barclay*, pp. 241-242).

SLIDE 7. Jesus said – in this passage: ... ***the kingdom of God belongs to such as these... Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it*** (Mk. 10:14-15).

What is it – then – that Jesus liked so much and valued so greatly about children? Who knows, but we might guess at a few things!

SLIDE 8.

1. Children are humble. In this sense... They haven't yet learned about ambition and greatness. It's just not on their minds. They haven't yet learned - also - about the healthy understanding of the importance of self. So they are un-self-conscious. They move about the world with a kind of innocent abandon.

2. Children are curious. Children explore and ask questions. They are learning about their world. Next to learning - very early - the word NO – they learn the word WHY?

"Time for bed!"

"Why?"

"Because you need your rest!" (Or – you say to yourself – because I need – my rest!)

"Why?"

"Because rest is what you need to have energy to do fun things tomorrow!"

"Why?"

"Because that's how God made you!"

"Why?"

"You'd have to ask Him!"

Which gives way to more curious questions in sentences starting with the word WHY – like: Why is the sky blue? Why are people afraid of spiders? Why have the Vancouver Canucks never won the Stanley Cup?

Children are curious.

3. Children are trusting. Children instinctively realize their own helplessness and ignorance – and so they trust the ones who can help them and know more than they do. And children believe the best about others – they have a hopeful confidence in humanity. Children make friends of complete strangers.

The kingdom of God belongs to such as these – the humble, the curious, and the trusting. Are we like this? In increasing measure? If not, why not? If we are, how are we getting there?

THE RICHEST

Then – in contrast – a rich young man came running to Jesus and threw himself at His feet to ask Jesus how he might inherit eternal life (Mk. 17).

What a scene: this rich, young aristocrat falling at the feet of the penniless prophet from Nazareth who was on His way to being an outlaw!

“Good teacher!” he began – and Jesus would have none of it.

He answered back, “No flattery! Don’t call me good. No one is good but God. Keep that word for Him.”

Jesus stops this man in his tracks.

First – he said – in effect, “Stop and think! You are caught up in a moment of emotion and haste. Slow down. Think calmly about what you are doing.” Right away – Jesus is readying the man for the cost of kingdom commitment.

And the cost will be high and personal for this young man.

Second – he said – in effect, “The kingdom – which includes eternal life – is not only about the *bad* you *haven’t* done – like not killing, not committing adultery, not lying, not stealing, not defrauding – it is as much or more about the *good* you *could* do.”

“With all your possessions and wealth, with all that you could give away, what positive good have you done to others? How much have you gone out of your way to help and comfort and strengthen others as you might have done?”

SLIDE 9. It’s as William Barclay observes, “**Respectability, on the whole, consists in *not doing things*; Christianity consists in *doing things*” (The Daily Bible Study: The Gospel of Mark, William Barclay, pp. 244).**

And this is exactly where this young man – like some of us, perhaps – miss the point.

So Jesus – looking at him with love - issues a challenge, “Sell everything and give to the poor... then come follow me” (Mk. 10:21).

Again – in effect – saying, “I want to invite you into more than moral respectability. Stop looking at goodness as consisting in not doing things. Take yourself and all that you have and spend everything on others. Then you will find joy in time and eternity.”

The man couldn’t do it. He had too much stuff! – which he had never thought to give away – which when Jesus challenged him to do so – stunned him.

It may have been true that this young man had kept the commandments – to not kill, lie, steal, defraud, or commit adultery – but it also seems that he had not been – nor could he bring himself to become – positively and sacrificially generous.

We might hear it said this way these days, “Well, I’m a good Christian – I don’t lie, I don’t swear, I haven’t cheated on my taxes or my wife, I haven’t killed anyone...” – like *not doing things* is all the Christian life is cracked up to be!

There’s more. There’s deeper. There’s better. There’s innocent abandon. There’s child-like curiosity and wonder. There’s confident dependence and hope and trust. And – there’s unbridled generosity.

But he wasn’t ready. He went away grieving – because he had many possessions.

Are we just good moral people? Is that all it is to be Christian?

Or are we caught up with and fascinated by Jesus? Do we give ourselves to Him? Do we readily say YES to Him when He asks us to say or do something? Are we curious about what He will teach us next or what adventure He might call us into with Him? Do we count on Him for everything so that we can navigate the tough realities of our days with joy? Do we hold all that we have loosely – so that we could give anything away at any time?

So, to summarize with a pair of application questions...

SLIDE 10. Application Questions

1. What would I change and what would I not change knowing that everything I do and say is in the presence of God?

2. What could I give away this week that would help someone? How could I be more generous with my time, talent, and treasure?

SLIDE 11. Homework

Read Mark 10:32-45; the third announcement of Jesus’ passion and resurrection, James and John want seats, and Jesus teaches about greatness looking not so great.

