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How to Be Great

Mark 9:30-37

One of the reasons Jesus chose the men He did to be His disciples is because Jesus saw that they were teachable. I know, there were times like in this event the disciples did not come across as teachable. They struggled with believing lots of things Jesus taught them, but in the end, after the resurrection of Jesus and His ascension into heaven, the disciples got it. They believed the truths Jesus taught them and they taught those same truths to others. They even died for those truths. Who else could Jesus have chosen? Gentiles? That would never work. The Pharisees and Sadducees? They were too ingrained in their own beliefs. Though they knew well the Hebrew scriptures. Yet, Jesus did not choose any of them because He knew they would not change how they believed the scriptures. Christianity is about changing the way we think and believe (Romans 12:2). When we think and believe correctly, we will change our behaviors and actions. The Jewish religious leaders would not change how they believed, so their behaviors would not change. Instead, they got angry at Jesus because Jesus actually did what they should have been doing. Jesus showed compassion for all people. He healed people and changed their lives. He fed people when it was the right thing to do. Because Jesus kept doing all the right things with the people, the religious leaders got angrier and angrier with Jesus until they wanted Him dead. They feared losing power and control over the people and the kingdom.

To be honest, there were some Pharisees who wanted to know the truth. Nicodemus was one of them. He came to Jesus at night and said to Him, "*Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him*" (John 3:2). Nicodemus looked beyond what he had been taught and saw the actions of Jesus. He came searching for answers. He saw by Jesus' behaviors that there was something different about Him than all other people. What did Jesus talk to Nicodemus about? Something Nicodemus should have known from studying the Hebrew scriptures, which is our Old Testament. Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again, born from above. He needed to have a spiritual birth (3:3). With all that Nicodemus knew about the scriptures, he was totally clueless about this. Jesus told Nicodemus, "*Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?*" (3:10). Both, the Pharisees and Sadducees should have known and been teaching all the people that they needed to repent and be born again. They did not. It took the coming of Jesus to get this truth out among the people.

What was the next thing Jesus taught Nicodemus that night? He told Nicodemus that the Messiah would be lifted up for the nation. Nicodemus and all the other religious

leaders should have known about this too. They should have been teaching the people and preparing them for what was going to happen to the Messiah. Jesus said, *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:14-15). Instead, the Jewish leaders taught people to be obedient to the law according to their interpretation. They taught little about faith in God and service to Him outside the law. We are not told how Nicodemus responded to this teaching. Nicodemus is only mentioned in the gospel of John and only twice after this conversation. Nicodemus attempted to defend Jesus when the chief priests and Pharisees tried to arrest Jesus and condemn Him (7:45-52). The last time Nicodemus is mentioned is with Joseph of Arimathea. These two men took the body of Jesus after His crucifixion and, according to their custom, anointed the body with spices, wrapped it in linen and laid it in a new tomb (19:38-42). The disciples were not around to do this.

Since the religious leaders of Jesus day did not teach the whole truth about the Messiah, Jesus had to teach His disciples. Jesus did not teach the crowds about His coming crucifixion and resurrection. Doing this probably would have caused a revolt or riot instead of repentance and faith. **Mark 9:30** *“Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it.”* Jesus and His disciples avoided all cities, towns and villages for many days, maybe weeks. His main purpose was to **teach His disciples** about the most important event that was going to happen in their lives very soon. Jesus did not want to deal with the demands of the crowds while He taught His disciples. The crowds were often more interested in getting their needs met than learning God’s truths.

Verses 31-32 *“For He taught His disciples and said to them, ‘The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day. But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him.’”* These are not the only words Jesus told His disciples. He went into much more detail over several days. He wanted His disciples to know that when they went down to Jerusalem, His popularity would bring out the worst hatred in other people. That hatred would bring about His death. There were three times that Jesus talked to His disciples about His death. Mark 8:31, here in Mark 9:31 and again in Mark 10:33-34. Matthew and Luke record these same three times of teaching. Though Mark and Luke do not record that Jesus talked about being crucified, Matthew does in 20:19. The disciples knew Jesus was going to be crucified. They knew it was going to be an ugly death. Luke records Jesus saying, *“Let these words sink down into your ears”* (Luke 9:44). Jesus wanted His disciples to grasp everything He was teaching them. Jesus also taught them about His resurrection after

3 days. The disciples really struggled with the thought that Jesus was going to die such a cruel death. How could Jesus die? He had power over demons. The wind and the waves obeyed Him. People's lives were transformed because of their healing. Bread and fish were multiplied before their eyes to feed thousands. Jesus allowed evil people to do evil things to Him so that His death would pay the debt for our sins.

None of this made sense to the disciples, not even the resurrection. They did not understand Jesus. And they did not ask any questions. Do you understand? Do you know why **Jesus had to** die such a cruel death? Do you know why He was **willing to** suffer and die for us? Are you willing to ask questions until you understand? (Hosea 4:6). As God, Jesus knows about justice. He demands that we live a righteous life, following His commands. Our problem is that we have not. We are sinful people. Everyone has done something wrong, many things wrong. **God requires justice!** Because of our sin we deserve punishment. You might think that you are not that bad. That is because you are comparing yourself with other people. Compare yourself with a holy God and you will see how good you are not. Even our righteous acts are filthy rags compared to the righteousness of God (Isaiah 64:6). We are not good. We are selfish, prideful, greedy, envious, rebellious, not willing to believe God's truth. Yet, **God is also Love!** Jesus has compassion for us. Because God is love, He chose to take our punishment for us. **Jesus had to die** a cruel death because sin has to be punished to satisfy a holy and just God. **Jesus willingly suffered and died** to demonstrate God's love for us. What an amazing God! What an amazing love! **There is something that God requires of all people.** We must believe the truth of His sacrifice for us and His defeat of death through His resurrection from the dead. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16). Do you believe? Has your belief changed your life? Or do you still have questions?

Verses 33-34 *"Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, 'What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?' But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest."* The disciples did not understand Jesus and His mission. They did not understand their own sinfulness. Their lives were not changed yet. The disciples' sinfulness was on full display when they arrived back in Capernaum. Of course, Jesus knew what these disciples had been disputing. That is why He asked them. He wanted them to confess their sin, but they did not. They kept silent, too ashamed to confess their selfishness. First the disciples kept silent by not asking any questions, too embarrassed to reveal their lack of understanding. Now they keep silent because of their pride. Who is the greatest disciple? Was it Peter, James or John? They went with Jesus alone to witness His Transfiguration. The disciples were playing for

position and power. It does not end here, even after this teaching. The disciples were slow to learn. After Jesus gave His disciples their third teaching about His coming death and resurrection, James and John asked to be number 1 and 2 in God's kingdom (Mark 10:33-37). How prideful. Here, Jesus did not tell the disciples who is the greatest disciple. He simply taught them **how to be great**.

Verse 35 *“And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.’”* Jesus challenged the disciples to rethink and understand greatness. Yes, the disciples desired to be great. In the world's view greatness can be seen as the one left standing above the others. Like our childhood game, King of the Hill. The greatest was the one who could knock everyone else down and remained standing. Greatness does not come about the same way in the kingdom of God. In God's kingdom, if you want to be first, learn to be last. If you want to be great, learn to be a servant of all. I know, we are not concerned about being great in God's kingdom. We just want to make sure we get in. How do you know you will get in the kingdom of God? Is it because we believe and go to church? What is believing God? Believing is seen by God in how we serve (Matthew 25:31-46), how we treat others and how we help others. How do you know you will get in the kingdom of God? It is because we believe in God and our belief has changed us into servants of God.

Verses 36-37 *“Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when he had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.’”* Some people believe that this little child was Peter's child. It is possible, especially if they were staying in Peter's house. What difference does it make? If you were Peter, it would make a huge difference. What does it mean to receive a child in Jesus' name? If you want to be in God's kingdom, if you want to be great in God's kingdom, it is not about advancing yourself above others. It is about caring for the least, the most vulnerable, those who cannot care for themselves. A little child is totally dependent on the parents. They would not survive without adult intervention. We are to help those who cannot help themselves. When we do this, it reveals Jesus in our lives and our place in God's kingdom. Help others!

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