

True Greatness

Mark 9: 30-37 (September 19, 2021)

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³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Historical Context

Ramsey MacMullen, in his book, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284*, describes a sense of class in the ancient world that, although recognizable to us today, was of a scale that we might have a hard time imagining. The ancient world had no middle class. Most of the wealth was accumulated at the very top of the social structure, and the bulk of people found themselves poor. Within the elite world, honor was incredibly important. “The upper classes emphasized, for everyone to notice and acknowledge, the steep, steep social structure that they topped” (MacMullen, p. 109). The rich wanted to associate only with other rich, they would intentionally insult and demean those who were slightly less rich, and hoped to accumulate favor with those who were above them.

In any culture, children are vulnerable; they are dependent on others for their survival and well-being. In the ancient world, their vulnerability was magnified by the fact that they had no legal protection. A child had no status, no rights. A child certainly had nothing to offer anyone in terms of honor or status.

Theme: True Greatness

True greatness, Jesus says, is not to be above others, but to be least of all and servant of all. It is not to ascend the social ladder but rather descend it, taking the lowest place. It is not to seek the company of the powerful, but to welcome and care for those without status, such as the child that Jesus embraces and places before his disciples.

The radical grace of God that Jesus proclaims and lives completely obliterates the world’s notions of greatness based on status, wealth, achievement, etc. Perhaps that is one reason we resist grace so much. It is much more appealing to be great on the world’s terms than on Jesus’ terms. Greatness on Jesus’ terms means being humble, lowly, and vulnerable as a child. Actions we take every day may have ramifications on “the least” that we might never consider. Taking seriously the vision of the kingdom of God here in Mark’s gospel might cause us to consider those with whom we socialize, what food we eat, etc. — decisions about which can impact the least among us.