

Discipleship According to Mark

Greatness in the Kingdom (Mark 9:30-50)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at Houston Chinese Church on May 24, 2026

Introduction

- ❖ **We're living in interesting times where the national discourse, over the past decade, has been about recovering the greatness of our country.** It's obviously become a slogan for many people. And it's been the source of never-ending political debate and disagreement. And I'm not trying to engage any of that this morning. I'm just pointing out that the concept of greatness has been thrown around a lot. Everyone has a different idea of what it means for our country to be great or of what it looks like for a person to be great.
 - **And regardless of your ideology—of which side of the aisle you're coming from—my point is that I'm not hearing anyone describe greatness in the way Jesus speaks of it in today's passage.** And that's what I find so refreshing about being in the Scriptures. Because when I spend too much time in the headlines, the newspapers, on social media, it gets depressing. Especially when you hear how greatness is spoken of and when you see how people chase after a mere worldly greatness.

- ❖ **But here, in Scripture, we encounter a kingdom greatness.** A form of greatness that characterizes the coming kingdom of God. That's perfectly embodied in the life of Jesus in the Gospels. **His greatness stands in stark contrast to this world.** It's honestly a form of greatness unfamiliar to those of us who live so enmeshed in this world. And yet, when we encounter this kind of greatness in the Scriptures, it awakens something in us. Because we know, deep down, that this is what we were made for.
 - **We were made to exalt and exemplify kingdom greatness.** To see it in King Jesus and to praise him for it. And then to pick up our crosses and imitate him in the way we pursue this greatness—and wield this greatness—in a way that confronts our world while simultaneously holding out hope of something better.

- ❖ **Friends, my goal this morning is to open the Scriptures, so that we see for ourselves what greatness in the kingdom of God looks like.** Jesus illustrates it for us here in our text. We said, a couple weeks ago, that Mark 8:27 functioned as a significant turning point in the Gospel. From this point on, Mark uses this language of being “*on the way*.” (8:27; 9:33-34; 10:17, 32, 46, 52) **That is, *on the way to Jerusalem*.** Up to that point, the setting of Mark's Gospel was in Galilee and the surrounding regions.
 - But from Mark 8:27 on, Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem and begins revealing to his disciples what he'll face when he gets there. He predicts his death and resurrection for the first time in Mark 8:31 and for a second time in our text. And on both occasions, his disciples don't understand what he's saying.

- ❖ **When Jesus envisions the greatness of the Messiah and his mission, he pictures rejection and suffering at the hands of this world.** But his disciples, on the other hand, are filled with ambitions for status and power in this world. **They need a lesson on kingdom greatness.** And so do we. I see three lessons in our text. (1) Greatness in the kingdom looks like humble service. (2) It looks like a broad-minded, Christ-centered posture. (3) It looks like a blood-earnest commitment to the cost of discipleship.

Greatness Looks Like Humble Service

- ❖ **The first lesson on greatness in God’s kingdom is that it looks like humble service.** Jesus stresses that on the way as he was passing through Galilee. Look with me at v30, “*30They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 31for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”*”
32But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.”
 - Notice how Galilee—which was so prominently highlighted earlier in his ministry as his base of operations—is now just spoken of in passing. He’s just passing through. **Because his focus is now on Jerusalem.** He’s headed on the way. And along the way, he predicts his impending death at the hands of men.

- ❖ Again, this is the second time Jesus said this and still they don’t understand. Last time, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him for talking that way. And Peter got rebuked by Jesus in front of everyone. So you can see why this time they were afraid to ask him about it.
 - Because they don’t want to be publicly embarrassed like Peter. **But it’s also likely that they didn’t speak up because the fact that they still didn’t understand his teachings was worrisome.** What could it mean? Maybe we’re not all that special? Maybe we’re no different than the ignorant crowds? **Maybe we’re not as great as we assumed?** Those anxious thoughts were running through their minds. They didn’t want to face the truth. So they clammed up and just let his words pass.

- ❖ But then we’re told, starting in v33, that upon arriving in Capernaum and settling into the house, Jesus turned to them and asked, “*“What were you discussing on the way?”*” *34But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.”* So Jesus noticed his disciples were in a heated discussion earlier. What’s notable is how they didn’t answer him. They kept silent. Sadly, their fears are confirmed. They really are nothing special. **They really are no different from both the crowds and Jesus’s opponents.**
 - Recall that that’s how his opponents responded to his question, back in chapter 3:4, when he healed a man with a withered hand and asked them if it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath. His opponents kept silent. They refused to face the truth. Now his disciples are doing the same. **They keep silent about the fact that they had just been arguing about who was the greatest among them.** Can you believe that?

- ❖ Well, it’s not that hard to believe if you think about it. **Earlier, Peter, James, and John had just been given a sneak peak at the future glory of the Christ.** Only these three got to see Jesus’s transfiguration where they caught a glimpse of his glory. **It’s like they received an elite, private-access preview of an upcoming blockbuster movie.** They feel so special. They feel good about themselves and about their future status in the coming kingdom.
 - Now Jesus had told those three not to tell anyone what they saw until after his Resurrection (9:9) But even without saying anything directly, imagine how those three must have hinted at the fact that something amazing took place on that mountain. But sorry, we can’t tell you about it. **Picture how much pride was ballooning for those three and how much resentment was growing for the nine**

- ❖ It's a sad picture. **Here's Jesus, on the way to his passion, speaking of his suffering and death. Meanwhile, his disciples are jostling over position and power.** He's counting the costs while they're counting their blessings and privileges.
 - So Jesus sits down and teaches. Look in v35, "*And he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.'*" **This statement captures the upside-down ethics of the kingdom of heaven.** The first shall be last, and the last first. The kingdom's definition of greatness upturns the thinking of the world.

- ❖ Notice that Jesus doesn't chide them for seeking greatness. But he does correct their view of it. **He says if you want to be in front; if you want to lead in my kingdom; if you want to be great—then be a servant.** Because you lead by serving.
 - That word for servant is the Greek word *diakonos*. It's where we derive the word *deacon*. **If you want to be great, if you want to be first, then be last of all—be a deacon.** Be a servant. *Diakonos* would've been the ordinary term back then for a table waiter. **Someone who is easily overlooked and under appreciated.** Who serves without fanfare or attention. Who's only job is to care for you and your needs.

- ❖ Just think of how easy it is today to sit down in a restaurant and have a waiter serve you faithfully and effectively the entire evening. And when it's time to pay the bill, you're looking around the restaurant wondering, "Which one is my waiter again?" I forget what he looks like. Or to be honest, I never paid attention in the first place. **We easily overlook table waiters. And yet the Lord pays close attention to them.** That's the point.

- ❖ **Servants are the greatest in the kingdom of God.** That makes little sense in our day. How much less in Jesus's? Where, in first-century Greco-Roman society, service was considered demeaning and never voluntary. **The famous Greek philosopher Plato once said, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?"**
 - How different is the kingdom of God! **Where true blessing, true happiness, is found in the act of serving.** Where true greatness is found in those who humble themselves and serve one another. Jesus exemplifies this later in the Gospel story when he puts on the garb of a lowly servant and begins to wash his disciple's feet. That was a powerful illustration of kingdom greatness.

- ❖ In vv36-37, Jesus offers another. **He takes a child in his arms to use as an illustration.** "³⁶*And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them,* ³⁷*'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.'*"
 - Jesus wasn't presenting the child himself as an illustration of greatness. **In this instance, Jesus was focusing on the insignificance of children in his day. They were on the very low end of the honor scale.** Children had no power, no status, no rights. They were among the weakest and most vulnerable in society.

- ❖ **Jesus’s point is that a great one in the kingdom of God will be a servant to all, even to someone as least as a child.** Which is an important qualifier. Because people have no problem being a servant—no issue with being a table waiter—if that means waiting tables at a fancy, three-star Michelin restaurant. If it means serving the rich and powerful who will leave you a generous tip, then sign me up! I’ll serve that clientele.
 - **But Jesus’s point is that you’ll find the great ones serving clients down at the local homeless shelter.** They’re too busy serving the weak and helpless. Those who can’t pay you back and won’t honor you for your service. If you want to be great in his kingdom, then show honor and humble service to the least of these.
 - Jesus states in v37 that he stands in solidarity with children. **To receive them warmly is to receive Jesus warmly.** To serve them is to serve him. What you do for the least of these, you do for Jesus (Mt 25:40). And what you do for Jesus, you do for the Father. To receive Jesus is to receive the Father.

- ❖ Friends, think about what Jesus’s teaching means. **It means there’s no need to repress our desire for greatness. But it’s imperative that we reorient our definition of greatness.** So you want to be great? Great! Be great by humbly serving one another, especially the weakest and smallest among us. The greatest among us is the one who serves out of the spotlight, without drawing any attention, not for selfish gain nor man’s applause—the greatest are the ones who humbly serves others in Jesus’s name and for his namesake.

Greatness Looks Like a Broad-Minded, Christ-Centered Posture

- ❖ That’s what greatness looks like in God’s kingdom. That’s our first lesson. The second can be put this way: **Greatness in the kingdom looks like a broad-minded, Christ-centered posture.** Where, in humility, you reject tribalism and competition between fellow disciples.
 - In v38, John is bothered that someone outside of their circle was casting out demons in Jesus’s name. *“John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”*”

- ❖ The irony is too rich. In the previous passage, the disciples were unsuccessful in casting out an unclean spirit (9:18). And now when they see someone actually exorcise a demon in Jesus’s name, they don’t celebrate. They complain. Why? Because he’s not one of us. **John was far too possessive of Jesus and far too prideful of his place in Jesus’s inner circle.** That guy shouldn’t be using your name to do good. Why?
 - Now you’d think John would’ve said to Jesus, *“because he was not following you.”* **But no, he was more concerned that this guy wasn’t following us.** He’s not one of us. Now we’re told this man was trusting in Jesus and the power of his name. So in a sense, you could say he *was* following Jesus. But John’s concern is that he wasn’t following *us*. **He wasn’t in our camp. He’s not part of our tribe.**

- ❖ This is how you’d expect someone to react if he doesn’t understand kingdom greatness. If he still equates it with privilege and power. **It’s no surprise that John cared more about his camp than about the Christ.** He had drawn a tight circle around his people and their ministry. And that was all he cared about. And he was generally suspicious of anyone else.

- ❖ **Friends, that’s called tribalism.** It was there in the beginning, even before the church was the church. **And it all stems from pride.** It’s what pride does to a body of believers. When we don’t see greatness as humble service, then our striving to be great will inevitably clash with others. With other churches. With other denominations. It’s always a competition.
 - **Tribalism for a church looks like a narrow-minded, us-centered posture towards other churches.** Where we’re generally suspicious of anyone outside of our tight theological tribe. Or that might lean left or right on a ideological or political spectrum. If they’re not following us—if they’re not doing church our way—then they’re the competition. That’s tribalism.

- ❖ **But let’s see how Jesus responds to that.** Look at v39, *“But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.”* Jesus clearly has a more open posture than John. Now it’s not so wide open that there aren’t any limits. He won’t just endorse *any* mighty work. **But if you’re doing a mighty work in his name—for his glory and his namesake—then Jesus is saying we’re on the same side.** We’re on the same team.

- ❖ This episode reminds me of that instance in Numbers 11 when Moses had gathered seventy leaders of Israel, outside of camp at the tabernacle, to be appointed as elders. And the LORD rested his Spirit on the seventy elders, and they prophesied like Moses.
 - But then young Joshua brings a report to Moses about these two men back at camp, who weren’t part of the seventy elders, who somehow received the Spirit and began prophesying. Listen to **Numbers 11:28–29**, *“²⁸And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, “My lord Moses, stop them.” ²⁹But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!””*

- ❖ It’s like Jesus is saying to John, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all my disciples could cast out evil spirits in my name!” **Don’t confuse your tribe with the kingdom.** Don’t presume that nothing great or praiseworthy happens outside of your group. **Don’t think the real ministry is only what takes place in your circle. The kingdom is far greater.**

- ❖ Now I don’t want to give the impression that it’s wrong to have a theological tribe or to be in a camp. **Theological and denominational distinctions are important. But Jesus’s point is that making his name known is of even greater importance.**
 - Look at what he says in v40, *“For the one who is not against us is for us.”* In other words, if they’re not against our ministry in Jesus’s name, then they’re for us. **You could say that that’s a “mere Christianity” approach for how to relate to other believers outside of your particular tribe.** The lowest common denominator is Jesus and his gospel. And as long as you’re preaching Christ and the gospel, making disciples in his name, then we’re on the same team.

- ❖ And it doesn't matter how splashy your ministry or how big your impact. **No matter the size or scale of your church, that shouldn't impress us.** The only thing that impresses is the fact that you're making Jesus's name known. That's what's important. That's basically his point in v41, *“For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.”*
 - **Jesus is saying that even the smallest and simplest act done in *his* name—like giving someone a cup of water—is an act of greatness.** As great as casting out a demon in his name. That makes sense in the kingdom of God. That's kingdom logic.
 - **The world's logic tends to puff up the great and leads us to exclude people and draw tight circles around us.** The world's logic says sensational works like casting out demons are more rewarding than the humble service of a table waiter. Far greater than bringing someone a glass of water.

- ❖ But greatness in the kingdom looks like a broad-minded posture. But again, it doesn't mean going so broad that you have no boundaries whatsoever. We shouldn't draw the circle too tight, but the opposite error is to draw the circle too wide. So there are boundaries. There is such a thing as heresy. **But instead of focusing all our attention on patrolling the boundaries, let's focus on what—or better yet *who*—is in the center of the circle.**
 - If that other church or tribe is centered on the Christ of the gospel, as revealed in Scripture, then we can get along, and even collaborate, though we might differ in the peripheries. **This is why greatness in the kingdom looks like a broad-minded, *Christ-centered* posture.**

- ❖ I don't think it's an accident that the particular instance that triggered this lesson was a case of demon-possession. **It's as if Christians—who are so occupied with infighting—are being asked the question: *Who is the real enemy here?*** Soldiers on the battlefield don't care about their differences on the peripheries. As long as they're fighting together, for the same country, against the same enemy, that's what matters.
 - **Missionaries on the front lines have long learned this lesson. They understand the importance of cooperation across denominational lines.** We can have our disagreements and respect our differences, but in the end, we're serving the *same* Christ on the *same* mission to make his name known to all nations. It's essential that the church—all us Christians behind the front lines—embrace the same lesson.

Greatness Looks Like a Blood-Earnt Commitment to the Cost of Discipleship

- ❖ That leads to our final lesson on greatness. **Greatness in the kingdom looks like a blood-earnt commitment to the cost of discipleship.** That's what Jesus gets at in vv42-50. *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”*
 - At first glance, it's hard to see how these verses connect with what Jesus was just teaching. He has in mind *“these little ones.”* That's not just referring to little children but to lowly disciples in v41 who are parched and thirsty. **His concern is that our actions don't cause weak Christians to stumble in sin.** To fall into sinful unbelief.

- ❖ How does that happen? **In this context, that could happen when we shrink the circle of who is a true disciple to a very narrow set.** Potentially causing a new believer or weak believer to question his or her discipleship to Christ. And, in the worst case, to fall into disbelief. To do that to someone is a sin in and of itself.
 - Jesus says that it would be better, for the one who caused another to stumble into sin, to be drowned in the sea with a great millstone tied around the neck. Yes, those words are quite graphic and shocking. But that's how serious we need to take his warning. The thought of drowning to death sounds horrible. **Can you imagine being dragged to the bottom of the sea by a great big stone tied around your neck?** It's horrifying. But Jesus's point is that the consequence of unrepentant sin is far worse.

- ❖ **Because the consequence is hell.** It's the Greek word *Gehenna*. Referring to a valley on the southwest side of Jerusalem right outside the walls. Where in OT times, human sacrifices were conducted there. The desecrated valley was eventually turned into a garbage dump. So by Jesus's day, to go to hell (*Gehenna*) was an expression based on this dump where the fires burning the garbage never went out. And the worms eating decomposed items never died out.
 - **Jesus goes on to say that if your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin, it would be better to chop it off or gouge it out, than to be throw into hell with all your body parts intact.** Now he's speaking hyperbolically. He's not endorsing self-mutilation. He made it clear back in chapter 7:21 that the source of our sin is in the heart. You can be blind, handless, and footless and still have a wicked heart corrupted by sin.
 - **His point is to be serious about sin in the course of your discipleship to Christ.** If discipleship to Christ is going to cost you something as precious as a hand or a foot, then so be it. That's the kind of blood-earnest seriousness and commitment that Jesus wants in his disciples.

- ❖ If coyotes have been known to gnaw off their own leg if caught in a steel-jaw trap—or if hikers have become famous for sawing off an arm that's stuck beneath a boulder—if they can exhibit such blood-earnest commitment in their situation, then how much more should Christians be committed to the cost of discipleship? Renouncing and repenting of whatever sin might cause us or someone else to stumble in the faith.
 - I think that's what Jesus is getting at when he says in v49, "*For everyone will be salted with fire.*" In the OT, all the sacrifices offered to the Lord were to be salted first and then thrown into the fire (Lev 2:13). **I think Jesus is using the fire on the altar as a metaphor for all the hardships related to the cost of discipleship.**

- ❖ **Following Jesus will cost you.** You'll suffer. It'll hurt. It might even feel like losing a hand or a foot. But it's worth it. Not only because you'll avoid the consequence of hell. **But because your life will be a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord.** Salted with fire.
 - And because your life will be salty. That's a good thing. People today use "salty" to refer to someone who's angry or resentful. **But biblically, to be salty means to be purified and to be a purifying, preserving agent in a morally corruptible world.** Listen to v50, "*Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*"

- ❖ Friends, there is a cost to discipleship. **And the great ones in the kingdom of God are those who accept the costs with a blood-earnest commitment.** And hear me out: It's not because the great ones are particularly brave and courageous.
 - **No, they count the costs of discipleship and accept them because they know their Jesus was salted with fire on their behalf.** He was thrown into the fires of hell to pay the consequence of our sin. He paid the ultimate price so that we could be saved by grace. **Knowing he endured all that for you and for your salvation, that good news is what fuels a blood-earnest commitment to the cost of discipleship.**

- ❖ Do you want to be great? Great! I want to be great too. If you want to achieve greatness, then live a life of humble service to the least of these. Embrace a broad-minded, Christ-centered posture towards others, especially those in other theological tribes. And commit yourself to the cost of discipleship with blood-earnest seriousness, knowing that eternity is at stake.