



Great in the Kingdom

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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September 1, 2013

PM Assembly



Introduction:

Perhaps the greatest danger of a zeal for good deeds is the pride of good deeds. “Look what I did.” “What I did was better than what you did.” “You aren’t as good as me.” We, of course, need to remember that the purpose behind our good deeds is so God will be glorified, not so we will (cf. **Matthew 5:16**). But how easy it is to get caught up in a competition with each other, arguing over whose abilities are more needed, whose work is more important, whose accomplishments are the greatest. I know as a preacher, I have a hard time listening to someone else preach and teach just to hear what good lessons from God’s Word I need to hear. Too often, I’m listening for style, organization, clarity, and to decide if I’m a better preacher than they are. And that completely misses the point. However, because of this tendency, I can completely understand what happened in **Mark 9:33-50**. The 12 had been arguing about who was the greatest. I can hear it now: “Hey, didn’t you see how many people I cleansed of unclean spirits on that one trip? I cast out twice as many as you.” “No you didn’t. That one guy I cleansed had 12 spirits in him.” “That still only counts as one.” “Whatever,” Matthew says. “Don’t y’all remember that party I threw for my friends and what Jesus said about that?” But Peter tries to trump them all, “Hello...doesn’t anyone remember me walking on the water. I didn’t see any of you doing that. And I’m the one who knew Jesus is the Christ. Remember?” “Whatever, Peter,” Andrew responds. “You wouldn’t be anything if I hadn’t come and got you and introduced you to Jesus.” “Yeah, Peter” Judas chimes in, “And let’s not forget that you are the one Jesus called Satan. Remember?” When they arrive in Capernaum, Jesus, knowing what they had been arguing about, asks, “What were you discussing on the way?” Ashamed, none of the 12 wants to pipe up with the answer. They must be certain to receive a rebuke if Jesus finds out what they had been arguing about. But He already knows. Mark records three vignettes in this Capernaum trip throughout the remainder of the chapter. Each one is specifically designed to teach us how the apostles got it all wrong. They did not understand what it means to be great in the kingdom. If we are not careful, as we devote ourselves and become zealous for good deeds, we may misunderstand as well. Examine the three vignettes found in **Mark 9:33-50** to learn the three keys to be truly great in God’s kingdom.

Discussion:

I. Serve the little people.

- A. When Jesus wanted to rebuke the apostles about their argument, he provided one of the most memorable object lessons of the Bible. He took a little child into His arms and said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” (**Mark 9:37**, ESV). He had already said if you want to be first in the kingdom, you must be last. Then he illustrated with this little child. What was His point? If you want to be great in the kingdom, you must serve the little people.
- B. We can miss this because in our day we have grown up to Whitney Houston singing, “I believe the children are our future...” We have seen television ads to support starving children the world over. In our day and age, we can’t think of anyone worth helping more than children. That, however, is a relatively recent cultural mindset. Until the mid-1800s in England and the early 1900s in America, children were often just treated like little adults whose job was to be the servants, not to be served. Children were either old enough to work and be useful or too young to be noticed and bothered with. In fact, even after hearing this teaching, when little children wanted to see Jesus, the disciples rebuked them. Surely, the Master doesn’t have time for little children (**Mark 10:13**).
- C. We must not misunderstand, however. The point is not simply that we must serve children. The point is those who are great in the kingdom serve those who are not obviously great in the kingdom. They serve the little people. They serve the seemingly undeserving. This term “receive” is a term of hospitality. It is the same term used to describe what Rahab did for the two spies in **Hebrews 11:31**, giving them a friendly welcome. We would be happy to receive or welcome some great kingdom dignitary. “Look at me, I welcomed Paul into my home.” “I welcomed Peter.” Or who could top, “I welcomed Jesus into my home”? But Jesus does not say the greatest in the kingdom is the one who stands in line to see the celebrities. The greatest in kingdom is the one who abandons the great crowds of hangers-on and sycophants trying to compete for greatness, and instead steps away to the little, undeserving people and serves them.

- D. In **Luke 14:12-14**, Jesus instructs His followers not to invite folks who can pay them back to their feasts, but to serve the little people who can't repay—the poor, the cripple, the lame, the blind. In **I Corinthians 12:22-25**, Paul explains that we need to bestow honor on the little people among us, recognizing that the weaker are indispensable.
- E. Think of it this way. Imagine a wealthy uncle who has only a handful of nephews as heirs. They always treat him well, but he doesn't know if that is because they are kindhearted, generous young men or because they hope to be included in his will someday. So, he dresses up as one of the "little people." He dresses as a homeless man and sets himself outside each of their homes to see how they will treat this man who can do nothing for them. He decides who to put in his will based on that. This is exactly the approach Jesus takes. Consider **Matthew 25:34-46**. How many excuses can we come up with not to visit these lowly people, not to receive them. But the great in the kingdom serve the little people.

II. Do the small things.

- A. The second vignette is amazing. Here is a guy casting out demons in the name of Jesus Christ and the apostle John felt he should stop him. But how on earth can he not get that a guy casting out demons in Jesus's name is okay? What was John's problem with that guy? He wasn't doing the same thing as the apostles. He wasn't following Jesus day by day. They had devoted their days and nights to following Jesus. This other fellow had simply heard him teach and started following Jesus's teaching on his own. But then Jesus gives this illustration: "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." (**Mark 9:41**, ESV).
- B. What?! A cup of water? What good is that? Anybody can do that. That seems to be pointless. I want to do great things in the kingdom. And that is Jesus's point. Those who are great in the kingdom do the small things. Those who are great in the kingdom don't view any service as beneath them. They don't view any task as too small. We all want to do the big things. We all want to baptize 3000 on Pentecost because people will notice what great work we've done. And, no doubt, there are big jobs and someone must do them. But if we find ourselves pursuing the big tasks because we think that is where greatness lies, we are missing the point. Greatness lies in being willing to do the small things.
- C. Consider the story of Naaman as most of the translations present it in **II Kings 5**. Naaman was a Syrian captain who had leprosy. One of his servants had told him that the prophet Elisha in Israel could heal him. But Elisha simply told him, through one of his servants, to dip seven times in the Jordan. This was beneath Naaman. The river was dirty and not nearly as good as his own rivers in Damascus. But his servants essentially asked him, "If the prophet had asked you to do something great, wouldn't you do it? Why not do this small thing?" (cf. **II Kings 5:13**, KJV, NASB). Many of us want to be seen for the great big things, but we overlook the small things because no one will see us. The great in the kingdom do the small things.
- D. Of course, there are some of us who wish we could do great big things, but we are afraid we can't, so we don't do anything. Once again, Jesus explains to us that the great in the kingdom do the small things. The reality is all the seemingly big things you see others doing are not really them doing it anyway. Consider what Paul says in **I Corinthians 3:5-7**. I have no doubt we think that Paul did great big things in the kingdom. But Paul points out that he only did small things. He simply planted seeds. God was the one who did the great big thing of causing all the growth. The great in the kingdom simply do the small things and God does the big things along behind them.
- E. Finally, consider the example of Jesus. He was certainly willing to do the great big thing of dying on the cross so we could be saved. But on the night of His betrayal, in **John 13**, He did the very last thing anyone would expect a master to do for His disciples. He did what was beneath everyone except the most menial of slaves. He washed their feet. Here He was the greatest in the kingdom becoming last. Rather than arguing for His greatness and reserving the biggest and greatest tasks for Himself, He got down on hands and knees and did the small things. The great in the kingdom do the small things.

III. Make the big sacrifices.

- A. Finally, Jesus looks again at the children He has used as his object lesson already and talks about how important it is not only to serve them, but to protect them. It would be better, Jesus said, to let yourself be cast into the sea with a millstone dragging you to the bottom than to do something that would cause one of those little people to stumble (cf. **Mark 9:42**).
- B. However, what intrigues me is the next thing Jesus says. At first, it almost doesn't even seem to follow. But it does go together. He talks about cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye if they cause you to stumble. Then He ends by talking about maintaining our saltiness and having peace with one another. No doubt,

there are all kinds of things we can learn from this vignette. But the main thrust of this section is that those who are great in the kingdom make the big sacrifices. Why do we make the big sacrifices? To preserve and protect not only our own souls but the souls of our brothers and sisters, even the little people among them.

- C. Jesus is making the same point that Paul does in **I Corinthians 8:7-13**. There, Paul talks about eating meats offered to idols. He explains that the idols are nothing and do nothing to the meat, so there is really no problem with eating it. However, some who came out of idolatry may have a weak conscience and be led back into practicing idolatry if they see some strong Christian eating this meat. So Paul says, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat" (**I Corinthians 8:13**, ESV). How powerful. That's a huge sacrifice. Can you see saying you won't ever eat meat again just to protect a brother or sister from sin? But that is what the great in the kingdom do. They sacrifice big. Not only that, but they even sacrifice big for weak people. Can you imagine that? Sure, I could see them sacrificing big for some of the big names of the kingdom, but for these weaklings who don't even understand idolatry? And yet, the great in the kingdom make the big sacrifices in order to protect even the little people.
- D. Again, look at Jesus. In **Philippians 2:5-8**, Jesus made the big sacrifice. He left the glories of heaven, came to live as a poor man in an enslaved nation. He came into the world with the bad reputation of being the child of a loose woman. Ultimately, He died on a cross as a criminal would. Who did He do this for? He did it for you and me while we were still sinful, weak, and ungodly (**Romans 5:6-8**). That is greatness in God's kingdom. The great in God's kingdom make the big sacrifices.

Conclusion:

This is what being zealous for good deeds looks like in Christ's kingdom. It isn't about being first, it is about being last. It isn't about being the greatest, but about being the least. It isn't about accomplishing the most, it is about serving the hardest. Being zealous for good deeds is not a competition. If you want to be great in Christ's kingdom, serve the little people, do the small things, and make big sacrifices. That is what zeal for good deeds looks like.