

Sermon – Life Observance Sunday

“Who Doesn’t Want to Be the Greatest!?”

Mark 9:33-37

SHORT SUMMARY: The world’s attitude is “Who doesn’t want to be the greatest?!” It’s love of self that leads the world (and us at times) down the wrong path, as the sanctity of life is replaced by “quality of life” and a utilitarian view of which lives are more useful to society. As Jesus speaks with His disciples about being great, we learn that Christ’s view of greatness and the world’s view of greatness are, as usual, as far apart as the East is from the West. When we see greatness in everyone else and live to serve others, that is true greatness. Christ’s greatness shines through in His life, death, and resurrection, as He served a world of useless sinners. Who doesn’t want to be great? Our sinful natures want to be, but the Holy Spirit leads us to shun that attitude and seek the good of all – from conception to death. God’s blessings as you proclaim God’s Word!

THE TEXT:

Mark 9:33-37 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. ³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." ³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (NIV)

NOTES:

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GREEK FONTS: The Greek fonts are those used by the Seminary – freely available at <http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/fonts/>

33 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"

House in Capernaum – Peter and Andrew’s? Their parents’ house? Mark 1:21,29-30

34 But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

The account, as it is recorded in Matthew, shows that the disciples realized that they couldn’t simply keep quiet. They had to answer their Teacher, so they disguised the true nature of their argument by asking, “**Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?**” (Matthew 18:1)

diale/gomai – to discuss, dispute, or argue; their shame implies that this wasn’t just a discussion; what caused the dispute. Recently Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John to the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus recently paid the tax for himself and Peter by the miracle of the coin inside a fish.

mei/zwn – comparative of me/gaj; but often used in the superlative sense; Rabbis taught that there would be different ranks in the Kingdom of Heaven¹. Recent events that might have led up to this

argument - only Peter, James, and John invited to the resurrection of Jairus' daughter and the transfiguration of Christ (Luke 8); of the disciples only Peter had his tax paid by the miracle of the coin in the fish (Mat. 17)

35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Though their sinful thoughts deserved rebuke, Jesus calmly sits down and calls His disciples to Him.

Being first is not a matter of wishing - *qe/lei*, it is a matter of service – *dia&konoj*. Note that we are not talking about *dou~loj*, which denotes dependence, but rather someone who willingly works for others (the word from which we have deacon).

The one who is great in the kingdom of God, doesn't desire being first. Humbly he realizes that he doesn't deserve a place in God's kingdom; it is purely by the grace of God. He then humbly serves with a grateful heart... so even without desiring to be great, he is considered great.

36 He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them,

Before the words of Mark 9:37, Matthew records these words, **"I tell you the truth, unless you change**

(strafh=te - turn) and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3,4)

paidi/on – child (Peter or Andrew's, or Ignatius Theophorus (God-borne)?), the diminutive of *pai=j* (child); a very young child or infant; It would not be an infant in this case, because as Matthew 18:2 says, the child is able to be called forward and stand among the disciples. A toddler? Used of both boys and girls, though there is a specific word for girls: *paidi/skh*

strafh=te – turn; they must turn from their sinful attitudes of pride

tapeinw&sei – to literally lower something or someone: to humble, shame, humiliate; The same word that is used in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: **"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"** (Luke 18:14). The same word for Christ's humiliation: **"he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!"** (Philippians 2:8).

ou) mh/ - most definitely will not enter under these conditions – that of not having turned from their pride

w(j ta/ paidi/a – "like a small child" – in what sense? Many speak of innocence, but we all know that children are sinful too. But Jesus is talking about the child who both trusts and obeys his parents as the ones in authority. We don't hear of Jesus having to repeat himself to get this child to come to Him. The child heard Jesus' summons and gladly came to him. It didn't even occur to the child to think, "Who are You to boss me around! You're not my dad!" Matthew's account shows that Jesus was pointing to the humility of little children – **"whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."**

37 "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

e4n tw~n toiou/twn paidi/wn – "one of these little children" In what way are we welcoming Christ? By serving someone, who cannot possibly serve us at the same capacity as we serve them, we are serving our Lord, who served us, knowing we will never be able to

repay him. What's important is that the welcoming (de/chtai) is done "e0pi\ tw~| o0no/mati/ mou" – in Christ's name. The welcoming is done to glorify Jesus' name.

So the person who is not looking to be great, but gladly serves all in Christ's name, not only is considered great, but is blessed by the presence and care of our GREAT God.

Synoptic Texts: **Matthew 18:1-5; Luke 9:46-48**

BRIEF OUTLINE SUGGESTIONS

Mark 9:33-37 They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them,³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Jesus Shows Us the "Great" Life

It's the one that
humbly serves It's
the one that
welcomes all

Who Doesn't Want to Be Great?!

I. The person who already is 'great' ... in the eyes of God. v. 33-35

II. Little children and those who welcome them in Christ's name v. 36,37

LENGTHIER SUMMARY & PURPOSE OF THIS SERMON: Who doesn't want to be great?! All of us struggle with pride. We all want to be great, and in the process of demonstrating our greatness, we must convince ourselves and others that our rivals are weak. In the eyes of God, that isn't greatness. Greatness is demonstrated by disregarding the world's measures of greatness – intelligence, strength, talent, charisma, etc. The rhetorical question, "Who doesn't want to be great?!" is posed as if there could only be one answer – "Of course, everyone wants to be great!" But there really is an answer to 'who doesn't want to be great?': It's the person who isn't seeking greatness. He simply and humbly serves. Before God, that is true greatness. That is greatness that we all lack. Our pride is disgusting before God and deserves His rejection... and like the disciples we should be ashamed of our pride. But Christ, having overcome all temptation toward greatness, became a servant of all, so that we could be forgiven for this constant striving toward greatness. Since He has welcomed us, sinners, we welcome all in His name, even little children, who can't pay us for our service, who can't vote us into office, and who can't give us service equal to what we give them. The Christian gladly says, "God is great! My neighbor is great! This small child is great! I gladly serve them all in Christ."

What does that have to do with life? The world has a different view of greatness, especially when it attaches its skewed value system to life itself. The world is utilitarian as to the value of life and the quality of life. We see that in the obvious attacks on the sanctity of life in abortion (how will this affect the mother? do we want a child born into a poor family – quality of life for the child and utilitarian as to expense for society) and euthanasia ("I don't want to live that way," and the idea that people who live too long are a burden for their children and the health care system). As our understanding of genetics progresses, children are aborted when they are targeted as having Down's syndrome.

To cure disease, scientists push for the use of embryos and their cloning, to open the magic of embryonic stem cells. As we map DNA, wouldn't it be tempting to root out more than genetic defects?

Can we make people more intelligent and stronger? Can we give them abilities – musical, linguistic, artistic? Can we decide to have a boy or girl, right-handed or left-handed? Can we form a child that would be genetically compatible with an older sibling that may need organ transplants? Are we really able to determine what qualities make for a better person? Isn't that eugenics?

The purpose of this sermon is to declare what God considers to be great – the heart that puts others first. That is not something that you can genetically engineer. Only the Holy Spirit can do that through the work of the Word, which points us daily to our Redeemer. We glorify God, by letting Him do the engineering. We glorify God by using science to help others, but not at the expense of even a single life, no matter if they are just a few cells old or a few brain cells short of consciousness.

EXTENDED OUTLINE

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."³⁶ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them,³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Who Doesn't Want to Be Great?!

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WHO DOESN'T WANT TO BE GREAT?!

INTRO: If you could change things about yourself – physically and ability-wise, what would you change? Why? Is it because you want the gifts and talents that make people great? In our lesson today, Jesus gives His disciples a lesson on greatness, and that should interest all of us, because...
"Who Doesn't Want to Be Great?!"

I. The person who already is 'great'... in the eyes of God. v. 33-35

A. "Who doesn't want to be great?!" - We all have the sinful desire to be first

1. The disciples wanted to be considered great

a. They knew it was wrong, they didn't want to answer Jesus

b. They tried to disguise the argument in another question (Matthew 18:1)

2. We want to be great too

a. This desire leads us to boast of God's gifts, as if we earned them; we sinfully compare natural gifts

b. This affects our view

of human life:

Examples:

How can I bring a Down's syndrome child into the world – his life won't be great?

Let's genetically engineer the next generation to be smarter, stronger, and

more talented! Let's weed out the undesirable genes from the pool

TRANSITION: Are "normal" children better than handicapped children? Who decides what gifts are

really better? What lives would be lost in experimentation? Who decides which person is “great” and which ability would make them “great.” Jesus had an answer for us and His disciples:

B. Jesus declares greatness in humble service – being last

1. Who is great? The one ‘who doesn’t want to be great’ (without a question mark)
 - a. They humbly consider themselves last **“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last”**
 - b. As last they live to serve. **“...and the servant of all”**

TRANSITION: Do you know anyone who is really like that? If this makes people great, then no one would be great in God’s eyes, not even the disciples... But there is One, who would not have raised His hand if the question were asked, “Who doesn’t want to be great?”

2. “Who doesn’t want to be great?!” Jesus didn’t seek greatness.
 - a. Jesus humbly considered Himself last for our sake (to replace our pride with His humble obedience) – Phil. 2:5-8
 - b. Jesus served us all! (to pay for our pride by His sacrifice) – John 3:16; Mark 10:45 (Which is worse – a genetic defect requiring a life of service, or deliberate rebellion that required the life and death of God’s eternal Son?)

APPLICATION: We can’t genetically engineer a person who is great in the kingdom of God, because it isn’t a quality in our DNA. We’ll never be able to weed out the ‘pride’ gene. Whoever doesn’t want to be great, but puts themselves last and is ready to serve all, they are great in God’s eyes. That attitude can only come through the working of the Holy Spirit. That attitude values every life as worthwhile for us to serve, no matter if that life is only a few cells old, or few brain cells short of consciousness, or a gene short of worldly greatness or even normality. We fight for life at its every stage. We fight for life, no matter its quality. This is part of the humble service we’ve been called to.

TRANSITION: This is a hard battle, though, isn’t it? If only we could recruit a solid group of famous celebrities, powerful politicians, influential speakers, and university professors to our side to give it more clout! If only the ‘great’ people of the world were on our side!

When Christ instructed His disciples about greatness, He didn’t call for Herod or Pilate to stand before them... He invited a little child.

II. “Who doesn’t want to be great?!” **Little children and those who welcome them in Christ’s name** v. 36,37

- A. Jesus presents a little child as an example of humility. (Matthew 18:4) **“Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”**
 1. Herod and Pilate wouldn’t have answered Jesus’ summons (they were great, after all)
 2. The little child humbly went to Jesus’ waiting arms **“Taking him in his arms...”** (the child wasn’t concerned about greatness issues; he didn’t make Jesus give multiple invitations He didn’t say, “Just a

minute.” The child had no authority issues and was seeking no glory for himself. Who doesn’t want to be great? – Not this little child.)

B. We welcome Christ by welcoming little children

1. We still don’t understand true greatness, if we seek the favor and aid of ‘great’ people (Don’t we feel great when a politician or famous actor or scientist speak up for pro-life issues! Don’t we just want to slap them on the back and welcome them? Doesn’t that show that we still buy into the world’s view of greatness? We think that the most talented, most intelligent, and most charismatic people are the greatest and most useful to us.)
2. Little children have the least to offer and the most to offer
 - a. Children have nothing to offer in the way of greatness (When you help a child with their childish problems, can they help you with your adult problems? If you tie their shoe, can they fix your car? If you bandage their knee, can they save your marriage? If you comfort them after a nightmare, can they tell your boss to give you a raise? Little children can’t make people great – they can’t vote them into office, they can’t connect them with a director or a producer, they can’t even remember to close the refrigerator sometimes. So when you help a child, welcome a child, and you do it out of love for your Savior, not simply to get a hug or a child’s love, you’re serving the way the Lord wants you to serve – purely for love’s sake.)
 - b. Except when God tags along “**Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.**” (When you set the welcome mat to your heart before little children, don’t be surprised when it’s God who steps in. Service isn’t easy: it takes time [God has plenty of it to share], it takes effort [God’s strength is all-sufficient], it takes love [not all of humanity could use up God’s love], you won’t get out of it, as much as you put in [you’ll get more, because God rewards us as perfect sons and daughters]. Sometimes when people realize they aren’t great, they cling to someone who is. God tells us to do the opposite. When you see your own failings and pride, embrace those who can’t help you, who can’t give you a single thing in return, do it in the name of the One who forgives you, and watch what blessings flow forth; watch how greatness becomes unimportant, watch how life finds its true value in God and service)

APPLICATION: It’s disgusting when children are used, instead of being protected and cared for.

We are repulsed by the horrors of child labor or children being forced into militant groups. We should likewise be appalled at society’s love for greatness, which creates a utilitarian mentality that threatens children at their most helpless stage of development. The value of a life shouldn’t be based on what benefits it offers. Scientists push for legalization and funding of embryonic stem cell research, promoting the potential uses, cures, and hopes.

They make their sales pitch to use the lives of the unborn, by playing on the fear, for example, of a family’s history of Alzheimer’s. “You don’t want to end up like that! Is it too much to ask to clone these small clump of cells, these embryos? Look at the possibilities, if we could just experiment with life at its first stages...” That’s not welcoming children, that’s using them.

CONCLUSION: So... who doesn’t want to be great? *<said like you’re actually looking for that person. Then pointing to the cross...>* Thank God, Jesus Christ was not looking for greatness... otherwise He never would have left His throne in heaven, but the First became Last and the servant of all, so that we might enjoy the greatness of heaven, so we might stop striving for what we already have, and settle down to the business of people who are great in the kingdom of God: serving others. No life is too small for this service. No life is so useless that it doesn’t deserve our service. As Christ welcomed children, we welcome the helpless lives. We open our arms to the

orphans, whether they're frozen embryos, babies with Down syndrome, or placed for adoption by a young mother. We receive the weak and the disabled, the struggling mother who made the right choice and the guilt-ridden mother who made the wrong choice. We don't do it because that's 'what Jesus would do,' but because that's what Jesus DID for us, when He saw a life that was going to be destroyed eternally and could do nothing to save itself. Now we know what greatness is all about.

FACTS & QUOTES YOU CAN USE:

Areas in which life is devalued because of our worldly understanding of greatness:

DOWN'S SYNDROME: "Recent US studies have indicated that when Down syndrome is diagnosed prenatally, 84-91 percent of those babies will be killed by abortion."²

ATTITUDE OF EUGENICS – GENETIC CONTAMINATION: "Doctors can now keep alive 90% of babies born with genetic defects. This success in lifesaving leads to what is called the contamination of our genetic pool. Just as some have spoken of the heat-death of our world, others now project the genetic death of the human race through such genetic contamination."³

NOBEL PRIZE WINNERS FOR ABORTION

John Sulston – "I don't think one ought to bring a clearly disabled child into the world."⁴ (He won the Nobel prize for his discovery of the 'genetic regulation of organ development and programmed cell death')

James Watson - The Nobel prize winning scientist, who unraveled the structure of DNA, said that women should be able to abort fetuses at will if advances in genetics showed that they would be born gay, or dyslexic, or musically untalented or even too short to play basketball.

In an interview with *The Independent*, Dr James Watson said "there could be 1,000 different reasons" why women might want to abort a child, "many of them absurd," but society should do nothing to stop them.⁵

¹ Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. 1990 one-volume edition; ii. p. 115

² Susan w. Enouen, PE. *Down Syndrome and Abortion*. Life Issues Connector, April 2007. reprinted at: <http://www.christianliferesources.com/?6785>

³ December 1974. Ramm, Bernard. *An Ethical Evaluation of Biogenetic Engineering*. <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1974/JASA12-74Ramm.html>

⁴ Quoted in Brendan Bourne, "Scientist warns disabled over having children" *The Sunday Times* (Britain) (13 October 2004). Available online at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-1337781,00.html>

⁵ Steve Boggan & Glenda Cooper. *Nobel winner backs abortion 'for any reason.'* *The Independent* (London). February 17, 1997.

cf. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_/ai_n14094216