

"If Anyone Desires to be First"

As I'm sure everyone knows, the Olympics just finished a week ago in Beijing. Most of us probably watched a number of competitions during the last couple weeks, and now the festivities are over. And when you think of the athletes, I'm sure many things stand out, but one thing inevitably does. If you are an Olympic athlete, you most likely desire to be first. That's the whole idea of a sports competition. That's why they give out medals. That's why they keep world records. You train, and you work hard, you get coaching, and you do that over and over again for years, until you finally compete, and you desire and hope to be first. That's not only natural, but it's certainly a good desire. There's nothing wrong in one sense to want to excel in whatever you do, especially in a sports competition.

But what about the disciples here? We find them having a competitive attitude with each other. Jesus catches them arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. And Jesus then even instructs them on how to be first. Well, is this desire by the disciples a good desire or a bad one? Was it good that they wanted to be first or bad? What does Jesus think about this?

We'll as we look at this passage, we'll see both. There certainly is a bad aspect about the disciples' desire here. But Jesus then turns their bad desire around and makes this into a positive teaching moment. Jesus uses this opportunity to teach them another important aspect about Christian discipleship. Jesus shows how disciples, if they are going to excel as Christians, must do so through radical service and humility. Jesus shows them how success in his kingdom is measured in radically different ways than how the world thinks we should find success. And this is a message that we all need to be constantly reminded of, because it's one so prevalent in the New Testament, and yet one that can be so difficult to live out.

And so let's dig into this passage and begin by asking if this desire by the disciples was a good desire or a bad one. Well, right away, we can see some indicators of the bad aspect of their desire here. Let's begin in verse 33. Mark tells us that Jesus and the disciples arrive in Capernaum. But then we learn of something that happened along the way. Evidently the disciples were engaged in an argument along the way to Capernaum. It seems Jesus already knows what they were arguing about, but he asks them anyways. "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" He gives them a chance to confess to him what they were discussing. But they were silent, verse 34. The disciples' silence suggests that they knew there was something inappropriate about their conversation. Verse 34 gives us the reason for their silence - because they had been arguing about who would be the greatest.

Right away, the disciples' silence shows that their desire was bad. This same exact phrase describing their silence was used by Mark to describe Jesus' opponents back in chapter 3 when Jesus confronted them about their bad view of the Sabbath. In both cases, the silence is revealing. Here the silence of the disciples seems to indicate their embarrassment or shame about their conversation. Their motivation in their argument was presumably prideful. They had been looking to exalt themselves. And so their motivation was self-focused. And when confronted about it, they had nothing to say.

Notice another thing here that shows the disciples themselves did not think their conversation was that appropriate. Verse 33 says that they had been arguing "amongst themselves". In other words, here they are hiking along the road to Capernaum, all of them together, and they found a way, or so they thought, to talk about this privately amongst themselves. In other words, they found a way to talk about this without involving Jesus in the conversation. They were fine to pridefully talk about this amongst themselves, but it's as if they all knew Jesus wouldn't approve of the conversation. But as long as *they* all approved of the conversation, they evidently didn't mind discussing it amongst themselves. (We can do that too - sin doesn't seem so bad if others are willing to sin along with us.)

For that matter, I get the sense that the disciples were probably bickering back and forth. They were probably competitively bickering with each other, making a case for why one is greater than the other. Who knows what started it. Maybe some were jealous that Peter, James, and John, had just gone alone with Jesus up the mountain. Maybe Peter, James, and John, even arrogantly boasted of that special time with Jesus. Who knows? But I certainly get the sense that there was some competitive bickering going on here. If you've ever been in that sort of situation, bickering with someone, you probably felt right at the time to be acting in that way. But then when someone else comes along, you probably both realize that you are not acting in a very commendable way and so you probably both stop your bickering for the moment - maybe to pick it back up later as soon as that third party leaves.

Now Jesus doesn't directly rebuke them for their desire here. And yet Jesus' response clearly shows that there needs to be some correction going on. Jesus stops what he's doing, sits down, and calls all the disciples together. He says, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." The very fact that Jesus has confronted the disciples here on their argument shows that Jesus disapproves of what they had desired. Jesus' teaching them about this confirms his disapproval. Jesus is correcting them by teaching them. And yet, there is also a sense in which Jesus takes their bad motivation and offers to transform it into something good.

Just notice his first words "If anyone desires to be first." I already mentioned with the Olympics example, that sometimes it is quite appropriate to want to be first. And so Jesus acknowledges that there is a certain motivation in the disciples that could be considered positively. It's a good desire to "be all that you can be." It's a good desire to have a "commitment to excellency." And yet look at how Jesus continues: if you want to be first, it's by being last. If you want to be the greatest, it's by becoming the least, by becoming a servant. This is a radical notion.

You see in this world, there is nothing wrong with wanting to become first in many areas. There is nothing wrong with wanting to excel in certain things. But you see Jesus isn't just talking about how things work in this world. You see, neither Jesus nor his disciples are talking about being first in general. They are both talking about being first in the kingdom of God. Later in chapter 10, we'll see that explicitly - James and John will ask Jesus to grant them the highest positions of honor when Jesus comes into his glory. In other words James and John would ask for the greatest positions in the kingdom Jesus is bringing. And that is what the disciples are arguing about here. They are arguing about who is to be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. The parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke find the disciples explicitly asking Jesus that - they ask, "Who is the greatest *in the kingdom*?" So the disciples were looking to be the greatest in the kingdom Jesus was bringing. And Jesus is talking about the same thing. He is talking about how someone is to be first in the kingdom of God. But look how Jesus describes this: When it comes

to his kingdom, if you want to be first it will happen in a radically different way. You become first in his kingdom, by not trying to be first, but by trying to be last, by trying to become a servant of all. You don't become first out of an arrogant, prideful, self-exaltation. You don't become first by competitively looking to get ahead of others at all cost. No, you get ahead, so to speak, by humbly serving one another out of a genuine God-given love for one another.

That's what Jesus' instructions are. To become great in the kingdom he simply says two things: Be last and be a servant. And he says to do this for everyone. We are to be last of everyone and we are to be a servant of everyone. That's how to excel in his kingdom.

This should strike you as radical. You should notice how this seems to be in reverse, almost a contradiction. I'm sure the disciples had some trouble understanding this. Why? Because look at verse 32. Jesus had talked about his own suffering and mission, and they were confused. They were confused about Jesus' mission because they were confused about the nature of his kingdom. They knew Jesus was the Messiah, but they didn't understand his mission or his kingdom. Maybe they were still thinking too much about how God's kingdom was expressed in the Old Testament. Maybe they were thinking about the glory of the Old Testament that was full of earthly types and shadows. In the nation of Israel, the glory of God's kingdom was seen in earthly ways. For example, they had a land of milk and honey. The people were each given a plot of land to have as their personal inheritance. They had a nice temple and a nice palace, with earthly freedom and privileges as a nation. But Israel had lost that freedom because of their sin. Since then, they had been under the occupation of some foreign government. But God had promised to restore the kingdom through the Messiah. And so they kept thinking that this promised restoration meant a return to the old days of glory. And so the disciples probably assumed there would be some hierarchy in this new restored kingdom, and that they were in a prime place to get a pretty high up position in this new kingdom - after all, they were the king's own personal disciples who went everywhere with him - that should count for something, shouldn't it?

But of course, when the disciples thought like this, they just didn't understand the radical nature of the kingdom - either in the Old Testament or in the New. Even though the kingdom of God manifested itself in physical ways in the Old Testament, these were just types and shadows of the real kingdom which was yet to come in its fullness. The types and shadows in the Old Testament looked forward to the real kingdom yet to come. And so Jesus' promised kingdom was not an earthly geo-political kingdom. It was a heavenly kingdom that would ultimately come down to earth. And so, it should be no surprise that the rules operating in this coming kingdom would be radically different than how the kingdoms in this world operate. In our world now, there is a survival of the fittest mentality in society. Everyone is out for themselves. Everyone is part of the rat race trying to get ahead. Selfishness and pride lead the way. But that's not part of God's kingdom. God's kingdom would do away with sin. And so in Christ's kingdom there is no place for the sort of selfish, prideful, competition that characterizes this age. These negative aspects of competition in this world will be done away with.

And so if the disciples were to start living out the ways of the kingdom right then and there, they needed to radically change how they thought about getting ahead. They had to realize that Christ's kingdom would not be characterized with the same sorts of rules that the world has. They needed to rethink what it meant to excel in God's kingdom. As they began to understand the kingdom of God better, this would make more and more sense.

And that's what they are doing. They are disciples of Jesus. Jesus is still teaching them and training them as disciples. When Jesus says in verse 35, "If anyone desires to be first," this is reminiscent of his statement in the last chapter when he said, "if anyone desires to come after me." Both of these statements are about discipleship. Jesus is giving the disciples another lesson on what it means to be a disciple in his kingdom. Success as his disciples would be measured very differently from how the world measures success.

Jesus illustrates his point here with an object lesson. In verse 36, Jesus calls a little child to come before them. Jesus then says that whoever receives this little child, receives him, and whoever receives him, receives God the Father. In Matthew and Luke's account of this event, they show Jesus telling the disciples to identify with this little child. There's a sense where the lowliness and humility of this little child is to be a model for the disciples.

But here in Mark's account, the emphasis is not on the disciples identifying with the child, it's with the disciples *receiving* the child. And isn't that part of being a humble servant? In a worldly kingdom, if you possess a high status, the world would say that you don't bother with the little people or the unimportant. You deal only with the other elites. You probably don't even spend much time with your own children, let alone just any poor child. But here Jesus says that to be first, you must receive even the least of these. Even this little child -- and anyone else who comes in need. And as you do that in Christ's name, then you are actually receiving Christ. And if you are receiving Christ, then you are receiving God the Father.

You see that is what is so amazing about what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus used the disciple's sinful competitiveness to teach them a striking truth about the kingdom. This kingdom would be characterized by radical sacrifice and by welcoming those in need. Why? Because Jesus would be establishing the kingdom by his own radical sacrifice that welcomes those who are in need. His own radical sacrifice would be given to save sinners like you and me; to save whoever would come to Jesus.

And so it is Jesus' own prophecy in verse 31, the prophecy the disciples' didn't understand, it was that prophecy which shows who is truly the greatest in the kingdom of God. Jesus is. Jesus would humble himself and serve us through his suffering and death. Look at verse 31. At first glance, this just seems like another prediction of Christ's impending suffering. But look at how Jesus describes his coming death. He says that he is being delivered into the hands of men. Jesus is being given over to men. He is submitting himself to man. And when he submits himself to man, he will allow man to do whatever they please to him. He will allow man to kill him. Jesus would submit himself to man and man's judgment. This would result in the cross and death.

And why would Jesus do this? Why would Jesus submit himself to man, when man would put this unjust sentence of death upon him? Doesn't that seem just senseless? No, not at all. Jesus did this to serve us. He submit himself to man and man's unjust judgment, in order to satisfy God's just judgment. On the cross, the sins of God's people would be placed on Jesus, and the judgment would be satisfied. And so Jesus became last of all. He became the servant of all. He willingly submit himself to man, to suffer and die for mankind. And so he served man, in order to save man.

And in doing this, in becoming last and least, Jesus actually became the greatest in the kingdom of God. Now don't misunderstand me. Jesus, by the very nature of him being the eternal Son of God, inherently possessed the position of greatest honor already. But that's in terms of his divine nature. But as the God-man,

Jesus was exalted to the highest place. You see, the divine nature in Jesus humbled himself when he came to earth as a man. He not only took on frail human flesh, but he served man in his death. The result is that the God-man Jesus became exalted above all others. We can understand how the divine nature in Jesus would be exalted in this way - but we are talking about the incarnate Jesus - the one who was divine, but also human. We have one who is human, exalted to the highest place. Philippians 2:9 "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name." Jesus was exalted to this highest place by becoming the least and the last.

So do you see why Jesus is telling the disciples, that if they want to excel in the kingdom of God, they need to do so through humble service? You see, the only reason man can be in the kingdom, is because of the humble service of Jesus. He paid the ultimate price. He humbled himself more than any mere man can even do. And he didn't do it for friends. He did it for enemies. He submit himself to man who had spent their whole lives in rebellion against him. That is why man can now be in his kingdom. And so if Jesus brings us into his kingdom in this way, that is how we must now live! If we were brought into this kingdom through Christ's humble service, that must characterize our life now in this kingdom. Life in this kingdom is not about prideful self-exaltation. It's not about competitively trying to put yourself ahead of others. If there is any sense of competition in this kingdom, it's competing to put others ahead of yourself. It's competing to do good works.

Jesus in the gospel of John gives a beautiful illustration of this. Just before Jesus goes to the cross he washes his disciples' feet. Jesus then tells the disciples to likewise wash one another's feet. But then he clarifies. He tells the disciples that he did this as an example. He washed their feet as an example. He didn't do it just to set a pattern that the church should regularly wash each other's feet. He did it to set an example, that even he as the Lord and Teacher humbled himself to serve those who are under him. That is what the disciples are to do. That is how they are to act in the Christ's kingdom. They were to look to serve one another, even those whom the world considers beneath them. And as powerful of an illustration this was for Jesus to wash his disciples feet, his real demonstration would come at the cross.

Saints of God, Jesus is calling us to humble service. He is calling us to be least and last. He does not want us to pursue self-exaltation. That is not consistent with his kingdom which he has already made us a part of. His kingdom is founded on the greatest act of humility, sacrifice, and service. And so if we are to excel in his kingdom, we must do it through humility, sacrifice, and service.

For most of us, this is not a new truth. This is a message we see in Scripture in lots of places. We know that we need to have the same attitude which is in Christ Jesus, that he humbly submitted himself to serve others. We know this. I think we even try to practice it. But I think we need to be aware of the obstacles to actually living this out.

You see, we live in a very, very, competitive society. I already mentioned the competitiveness of sports. That's just one example. We compete everywhere it seems. At our jobs, we might compete for a promotion. Even at many schools now, you compete for a grade when the grading is done on a curve. We compete everywhere. Our world tells us that we *must* compete and get ahead, and do whatever it takes to get there. Now certainly there are good aspects to competition, we've already mentioned that. Certainly competition has its place and can teach us valuable lessons. I know personally I've learned great life lessons from playing competitive ice hockey growing up. But we also know the pride and arrogance and

selfishness that so often comes along with competition. We need to be so careful to make sure that doesn't work itself into our service for God.

And so when we try to serve in this way, do we still end up struggling with this issue of pride? Is some of our motivation still flawed with selfishness and arrogance, the very things Jesus has told us not to do? Are we actually exalting ourselves, in our attempts to humbly serve? I think this is all too easy for us to do. Just think of how this might look in the church. Do you maybe humbly serve others, while secretly looking to show how great of a servant you are? Are you serving, to say, "Look at me!" "Look at how much I serve!" Part of the reason why this is a danger, is because we can then make this into a competition among the saints. Each of us might want to pridefully show others how great of a humble servant we are! We might compete to serve and lead in a particular area in the church, pushing others aside along the way.

This can look like so many things. Maybe you are serving in an area, and someone else in the church comes to you with their own desire to serve in that area too. Do you protect your job from that other person - this is "my" ministry. Or do you rejoice that another saint is willing to serve and use their gifts too? Do you find ways to work together, or maybe even hand over that task to the other person, or do you try to protect your job from that other person?

Similarly, maybe you are serving in an area. Maybe you have a wonderful plan of how everything will look like. Maybe you have some glorious vision. But then someone comes along with different ideas. Do you push for your way or the highway in that situation? Even if you feel so strongly that something should happen in a certain way, maybe you need to step back with an attitude of love. Maybe you need to see that it's more important how you interact in love on an issue, than even the final outcome of whatever you are working on. If you are so adamant that your vision for something get's realized, maybe that's an expression of pride and self-centeredness, thinking that only your vision could be the right one. If you just force your ideas through (*even if they are better ideas*), have you fulfilled Christ's command to become least and last here? Especially if you leave the other person feeling inferior.

I think another way we can actually really be exalting ourselves in our service, is if we are trying to serve someone, and we actually make it more about ourselves than the person we are trying to serve. When we serve others, don't come with your agendas and preconceived ideas. Come looking to their needs. Listen to their needs. Find out what they are. Understand the person and their needs, and how to best serve them, and then go and serve them.

One last example - maybe when you serve, you do so with the hope or expectation that you will get something in return. Maybe it's some sort of recognition. Maybe it's some gift or favor in return that you expect. Now certainly, society has certain conventions for this, such as thank you letters. Thank you letters are certainly nice and appropriate ways for people to express gratitude for the ways people serve them. I do recommend that people who are served find way to express their gratitude. But for the one serving, I would urge you to beware doing something just because you hope to be recognized. If you do, then maybe you are not truly serving by trying to be the last and least. Maybe you are actually serving to fill your pride with the recognition of others. It's nice when people do recognize your service, but you should not have that as your motivation to serve. You should have your motivation to serve others because Christ commands you to. You should have your motivation to serve others as your own gratitude for what Christ has done for you. It's your way to *recognize* what Jesus has done for you, when you serve others unconditionally.

And so I think we need to be constantly challenging ourselves in this area. Each of us have lived all our lives selfishly and for ourselves before we became Christian. Don't think that all goes away once you become a Christian. This is something we will continue to struggle with. The world's influence doesn't help. We are constantly told that our personal image and honor is so important. And so Christ's call to this sort of service should seem counter-cultural to you. It should seem counter-cultural to you, almost backwards! If it doesn't, then ask yourself why? It's possible God has matured you in your faith so much that this sort of service just seems natural. But it's probably more likely that you are just not yet serving in this way yet. You probably have too much of your old self still filling your motives and interests as you serve.

And so be on guard! Don't let Satan turn your good intentions to serve others into something bad. Satan will attack us in this area. He'll attack us internally by tempting us to be full of pride. But he will also attack us by bringing conflict in this area. The disciples were arguing about who is the greatest. Today in the church, we can have the same sort of argument with each other. Oh, we are much better at veiling this argument. We are much better at hiding it. But this sort of argument is all too common. But Jesus knows. And guess what? He is calling you on it today. And so when you have this sort of conflict with others - and you will from time to time - confess your sins to one another and pray for one another. That is part of how we humbly serve others as well.

And so may our service be in light of Christ who has served us. I think a lot of ways you can safeguard your service is by trying to serve in secret. Jesus spoke about this on the Sermon on the Mount. He said, make sure that you do not do your good deeds before men, so as to be seen by them, lest you receive your reward here and now and miss out on your heavenly reward. Instead, as much as possible, seek to serve in secret, and that will help you from the temptation to exalt yourself in your service. And so may your humble service be a *genuine* condition of your heart, one that willingly gives up any seat of honor you have to encourage and lift up others in the name of Christ. As we receive and serve the least of these, we receive and serve Christ.

And so as you strive to do this, look to Christ for strength. If we are to have this genuine heart in our service, it will only be through Christ who changes hearts. And yet who better to change our hearts in this way, than our Lord who himself became the least and last so that we could inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus, the greatest in the kingdom, will surely grow this servant love in our hearts as we ask him to do this. Amen.

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