Mark Lesson 30 (2023)

**HOW TO BE GREAT AND HAPPY**

Mark 9:30-37

Key Verse: 9:35

“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’”

 In the previous passage, we learned how Jesus healed the boy with epileptic seizures (9:14-29). We used to focus on Jesus’ act of exorcism and why Jesus’ disciples failed. Yet, we newly discovered that Jesus’ primary focus was not on exorcism but on teaching his disciples the power of faith that brings the wholeness of God. We often forget that the primary goal of God’s salvation through Christ is to bring the wholeness of God into our lives. (Ro. 8:28-30; Jn 10:10). Jesus said in John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

In today’s passage, Jesus teaches his disciples to be genuinely great and happy. We see a stark difference between Jesus’ and the world’s ideas of greatness and happiness. After all, it was too tough for his disciples to accept and practice his teaching because they had already adopted the world’s idea of greatness. Their values and way of life were not so different from secular people, even though they were called Jesus’ disciples. However, they would not be effective disciples or positive influences on others until they were changed from the inside and their values and way of life were transformed. How could they do that? This is a fundamental challenge to everyone who follows Christ, including us. This morning, let us think about how we become great and content and positively influence others.

 Look at verses 30 and 31. “They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days, he will rise.’” Jesus and his disciples probably left the region of Caesarea Philippi and Mt. Hermon, where he was transfigured. They then passed through Galilee, probably heading to Jerusalem. It means that Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee was over. Now, Jesus wanted to continue focusing on training his disciples without distraction from the crowds.

What Jesus was trying to teach his disciples the most at this time was his messianic work through his death and resurrection. The first time he announced his suffering and death as the Messiah after Peter confessed Christ, Simon Peter tried to correct Jesus, putting him aside and even rebuking him (8:31-33). There was a clash of ideas between Jesus and his disciples, including Simon Peter. A few days passed, and on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus told them again about his suffering, death, and resurrection. This time, he mentioned explicitly that he would be delivered by the hands of men who would kill him. It reveals that his suffering, death, and resurrection were not a possibility but sheer anticipation. No one knew it except Jesus.

How did Jesus know for sure what would happen to him? Jesus knew because it was predicted in the Scripture, and he was becoming more aware that the time for him to fulfill God’s will was near. People read the Scripture, but they don’t necessarily come to realize God’s will. People tend to pick and choose. Jesus anticipated that what he would experience in Jerusalem was not pleasant. He would be humiliated, rejected, betrayed, mocked by sinful men, killed through the crucifixion, and then rise again in three days. It was the core teaching of the Scripture. Yet, Jesus’ disciples were not concerned with God’s will but only their interests. They were spiritually immature.

Verse 32 is Mark’s comments on the ignorance of Jesus’ disciples. Look at verse 32. “But they didn’t understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.” They didn’t understand what Jesus meant and were afraid to ask him about it because they still believed that Jesus would establish his earthly messianic kingdom in Jerusalem with his power and authority. They were sincere. But they were sincerely wrong. Jesus’ disciples were enthusiastic followers of Jewish religious beliefs and traditions. Therefore, their faith could not be built on Jesus’ new teaching until their false assumptions based on their tradition were deconstructed.

We tend to remain in our comfort zone through our religious traditions. Yet, it can be dangerous and not always healthy. It’s no wonder that Jesus told the Jewish religious leaders, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (Jn. 1:19) It made Jewish leaders very upset, but it also made his disciples very uncomfortable. What was Jesus doing? He was deconstructing the old value, ideas, and systems and rebuilding the new ones (Pic#1).

Look at verses 33 and 34. “They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.” Doubtlessly, Jesus knew exactly what they were arguing among themselves. They argued about who would be the greatest in the coming kingdom, which they expected Jesus to establish. The argument was precipitated by Jesus taking only Peter, James, and John up to the mountain where he was transfigured. It was such a fantastic experience they had in the mountain. Even though they were warned not to tell it to anybody until he was raised from the dead, I am sure the three disciples had an attitude of superiority and slightly looked down on the other disciples. And the nine disciples felt it and were unhappy about their arrogant attitude. Their argument about who would be the greatest in the messianic kingdom intensified. Jesus was concerned about his suffering and death, and the disciples were concerned about self-glory and self-aggrandizing. What a contrast! It’s for sure that the disciples kept quiet because they felt embarrassed about their childishness.

Surprisingly, Jesus didn’t rebuke his disciples for their childish argument, saying, *“Guys, stop arguing such childish things. Why don’t you grow up?”* No. It’s probably because he understood that the desire to be great was normal. We all aspire to become excellent to some degree. Why are we like this? It’s because we are created in the image of God, who is truly great. The problem, however, is that this ambition can be distorted due to our misconception of greatness and sinful nature.

Jesus knew his disciples’ view of greatness was ungodly and secular, not spiritual. They believed that the great were the ones who ruled others and controlled them. They envied those who had power and authority. As fishermen in Galilee, they had no chance to become great in the world. But they found great chances to grab high positions and power in Jesus’ messianic kingdom. They surely didn’t want to lose the opportunity. We often say that politics are a dirty game and a necessary evil. But surprisingly, that’s what was going on among the disciples of Jesus. Honestly, I am no different from them either. It’s also shameful that Christian church history is not an exception for dirty politics and endless power struggles. But how can we be genuinely great and happy? It’s not by establishing a big church or building a successful organization.

What did Jesus tell them about true greatness? Read verse 35. “Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’” In the world, those considered great are those who are wealthy, successful, talented, intelligent, and popular. People admire them and also try to become rich and famous. Nothing is wrong with that. I wish we could all become rich, famous, and successful. To be rich, famous, and successful, we must work hard. But the problem is that not all rich and famous people are great and happy. We know it through many examples. We also must realize that we don’t necessarily need to be rich and famous to be great and happy. Anybody can be great and fully content, but with one condition. They must follow the principle of life.

What is that? Jesus already taught his disciples this principle of life when he said in 8:34, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” I admire Apostle Paul, who preached the gospel and wrote so many letters which were included in the New Testament. *(Paul wrote 13 out of 27 books in the New Testament.)* But I admire him most because he practiced the principle of life in his personal life and ministry. He said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” But the disciples hadn’t yet accepted the principle of life, not to mention applied it to their practical life. Jesus was patient with his disciples and taught them again and again.

Read verse 35 again. “Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’” While speaking to his disciples, Jesus might have looked at them individually because it applied to everyone. In other words, he was ensuring that any of them had the potential to become great if they humbled themselves and served others. Becoming great in the kingdom of God is not for people with power and position in a worldly sense. Anyone who humbles themselves and serves others can be great and happy. It’s a life principle that we must follow.

When Jesus said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last,” he meant that we must learn to humble ourselves. Learning humility is not popular. These days, most people tend to exalt themselves, considering themselves more highly than they ought. When people brag about themselves, they look confident. So, it’s easy to feel intimidated by their fake confidence. We even wonder if we should humble ourselves. But that’s immature thinking. We must know that no matter how aggrandizing and exalting they may be, they are neither great nor happy. After all, it’s the universal truth that arrogance leads people to downfall. Having confidence is different from being arrogant. Proverbs 16:18 and 19 state, “Pride leads to destruction and arrogance to downfall.It is better to be humble and stay poor than to be arrogant and get a share of their loot. On the other hand, humility is a solid foundation for true honor and happiness.

Nothing is wrong with wanting to excel in the world. When we are in a higher position, we can serve others better. Jesus’ point is that no matter what position of power we may have, we should have humble servant’s attitudes. And we can be delighted. Jesus is the prime example of humility and servanthood. Philippians 2:5-7 states, “In your relationship with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

Greatness is related to the serving lifestyle. The Greek word for servant, *“diakonos,”* means someone who serves willingly. Servanthood is different from servitude. Servanthood is voluntary labor; its characteristics are willingness, genuineness, love, and commitment. Servitude is slavery, bondage, and involuntary subjugation. When we are genuinely humble, serving others is a joy and a new opportunity to grow in maturity, through which we can experience God’s living presence.

In verses 36-37, Jesus illustrates his point further. Read verses 36 and 37. “He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ‘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.’” We learn that our serving involves caring people, especially people like little children. A child was considered the least significant person in Jewish and Greco-Roman culture. The fact is that children and women were not even counted in number among the crowds. They were not only ignored but also abused by the rest of society. A concern for children and women was not the norm, even in the premodern world. Jesus was among the first to see how precious anyone is, particularly young children and women.

Jesus was aware of how his disciples were competitive with one another. They could not tolerate each other. They argued about who was number one among them. Taking the child in his arms, Jesus demonstrated how they should welcome one another despite their differences and self-ambition. Struggling to overcome pride and accept one another is one of the most challenging things for them. Yet, Jesus made it very clear. He even went further, saying that if we welcome a seemingly insignificant person, we are accepting Jesus and God the Father. In reverse, if we reject any of the little ones Jesus accepts, we are rejecting him and God the Father. It shows how we treat others is how we treat Jesus and God. **(Child=Jesus=God the Father)**

Let me close today’s sermon. Jesus said that if we want to be first, we must be the last and the servant of all. He also said that if we welcome a little child in his name, we are welcoming him and the Father in heaven. It’s hard to accept people who are different from us in social status, especially in religious beliefs and values. We tend to be judgmental and critical of those who disagree with us. We want to be powerful, rich, and famous in this world. But life isn’t about being rich, famous, or even perfect. It’s about being honest, forgiving, loving, humble, and kind. (Pic#2) We should obtain the wholeness of God if we want to be truly great and happy. Anybody can be genuinely great and happy if they follow the principle of life. “Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (8:34b) And “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all.” (9:35)