Be a high-ranking disciple

Text: Mark 9:33-42

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**Scriptures:** Philippians 2:4-11; Mark 9:33-42

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 502, 47, 271, 180

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#30)

**Theme:** True greatness for a disciple of Jesus in His kingdom is found in gentle, humble service of others that welcomes all fellow servants of the Lord

**Proposition:** Aim for a high position in Christ’s Kingdom

**Introduction**

“Live your best life” is a popular saying today (attributed to Oprah Winfrey). It means ‘*becoming the best version of yourself*’. Another popular saying is the advice to ‘aim high’ – this means that if you want to be successful you need to set ambitious goals and dreams for yourself. Our text this morning from Mark 9:33-42 reveals how to live your best life and how to aim high. In God’s Word we find true wisdom which is different to worldly wisdom. Sometimes true wisdom is the exact opposite of the ‘wisdom’ of the unbelieving world, as we’ll see today. The best version of yourself that you can be, is to be what your Creator designed you to be – a unique person, an image bearer who glorifies God and enjoys Him forever (from WSCA1).

As we come to our text from Mark’s gospel today, we find Jesus and His disciples at Capernaum, on the way from Caesarea Philippi in the north, journeying to Jerusalem where Jesus will be killed. Capernaum is located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus chose this town as the base for His ministry, teaching in the synagogue (1:21) and in private homes (2:1). As the disciples had been walking south to Capernaum they had been talking about something that, it seems, they were too embarrassed to disclose to Jesus when He asked them ‘*what were you discussing on the way?*’ (v33). Their reluctance to answer Jesus was likely for two reasons: Firstly, they had been arguing with one another; Secondly, their argument had been about who amongst them was the greatest

Have you ever been on a family car journey, perhaps as an adult or a child and there’s trouble on the back seat. One sibling says something like ‘he poked me first’, or ‘she ate all the chips before the packet got to me’, or “that’s not fair, it’s my turn to sit in the front not his”. It’s not a pretty picture and parents generally hope that nobody outside the family can hear the embarrassing arguments. Again we see that Mark’s gospel does not generally put the disciples in a good light but just ‘tells it as it happened’. We can read about the stupidity, slowness and pettiness of the twelve disciples and feel quite superior to that rather pathetic group of childish men who walked with Jesus about 2,000 years ago.

However, we would be wise to listen carefully to what Jesus taught them and then apply this truth to our own lives. Our text this morning encourages us to live our best life in Christ and to ‘aim high’ with the goal of being a ‘high-ranking disciple’ of Jesus. We’ll see this in our three points:

1. True greatness humbly serves all others
2. True greatness is not narrowly exclusive
3. True greatness is carefully gentle
4. **True greatness humbly serves all others**

How is a ‘great’ person different from other people in this world? They may live in an expensive home where someone else does the cooking, laundry, shoe polishing and gardening for them. They may also have a chauffeur to drive them around in their car. Some VIPs pay others go shopping for them. These professional gift buyers chose presents on their behalf. ‘Great people’ may have many servants to meet their personal needs. We see this general pattern in all human societies down through history. We know that the disciples had this idea of greatness in their minds when they were arguing amongst themselves as they travelled to Capernaum. Later, in chapter 10, Mark records that James and John, the sons of Zebedee wanted the positions of greatest honour close to Jesus, one at his right hand and the other at his left (10:37).

Jewish society in the 1st century AD was more hierarchical than ours in 21st century New Zealand. At the top in Roman-occupied Israel were the scribes and Pharisees, of whom Jesus said, “*they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called ‘rabbi’ by others*” (Matt 23:6-7). Not surprisingly, the disciples thought like other people in the world: greatness is about having a prominent position and being honoured and served by other people. They had ‘worldly wisdom’ but needed the wisdom of God (ref. 1 Cor 3:19).

So Jesus sat down in the house in Capernaum and called the twelve (v35). He said “*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all*”. Notice that the priority here is the complete opposite of the world, which could be expressed as something like *‘if anyone would be first he must be the first of all and the master of all’*. This worldly wisdom found frightening expression in the concept of the ‘Ubermensch’, ‘overman’, dreamed up by the 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche which was then adopted by Adolf Hitler when he ruled Nazi Germany.

In contrast, true greatness, Jesus teaches, is to be ‘the servant of all’. The Greek word translated ‘servant’ is the one from which we derive the term ‘deacon’. This word ‘servant’ refers to a person who ‘*gives assistance by performing certain duties, often of a humble or menial nature, including mundane tasks such as waiting on tables or caring for the needs of others in a household*’. Jesus graphically demonstrated the greatness of being a servant when He washed the feet of His disciples. He then explained to them “*You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet*” (John 13:13-14). Jesus affirmed both His greatness ‘Teacher and Lord’ and His willingness to be a humble servant. Think about all the different kinds of people that Jesus served during His earthly ministry: lepers, tax-collectors, those publicly known to be sinners, Gentiles, even Judas who would betray Him to His death. Jesus truly is the humble servant ‘of all’.

As Mark will write in the next chapter “*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*.” (10:45). Jesus, the Son of God, is truly great and has always been so. Yet “*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:6-8).

Brother and sister in Christ, Jesus has served you more humbly and completely than anyone else ever has or ever will. It was through His humble service that we are saved. He calls you (and me) to greatness in His Kingdom. I think we could say that He calls you (and me) to become the best version of ourselves and to ‘aim high’. So, will you aim to be a ‘high-ranking’ disciple? Will you willingly serve others, both in this covenant community and outside? Will you willingly lower yourself, humble yourself, to serve others, whoever they may be? This is the pathway to greatness in the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not ask of us anything that He Himself has not first done to an infinitely greater degree. True greatness is achievable by each one of us in this church, but not only here – which brings us to our second point.

1. **True greatness is not narrowly exclusive**

As fallen human beings we naturally tend to separate ourselves into two groups: ‘us’ and ‘them’. We see this in schools where the ‘in group’ looks down on the ‘uncool crowd’. We see this in the workplace where the management looks down on the workers. Sadly this ‘us’ and ‘them’ mindset is also seen in churches. Jenny and I were once members of a congregation in a different denomination and people used to tell a joke about themselves as churches. They would say the …………..think that they will be the only ones in heaven.

Even in our own Reformed churches, some people can think that we alone are the ‘true church’ – superior to others and rightfully exclusive. It’s possible to get this idea from Belgic Confession Article 29 which speaks of the true and false church, stating that ‘*these two churches are easily recognised and distinguished from each other*’. This was an accurate statement when first written by Guido de Bres in 1561 when there was only the established Roman Catholic Church and the reforming protestant church, but within 100 years the situation had changed. We know this from the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-1649) which states that ‘*particular churches…are more or less pure to the extent to which the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, the ordinances are administered, and public worship is performed more or less purely in them*’ (WCF 25:4).

In our text, as Jesus teaches His disciples, He explains that true greatness is **not** narrowly exclusive. This lesson begins when John says: "*Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us*" (v38). The unnamed person John refers to clearly believed in Jesus because they were casting out demons in His name but this person was not one of the twelve disciples. The disciples’ reasoning seems to have been that this work of exorcising demons was exclusively theirs to do.

It is true that Jesus sent the twelve out in pairs and gave them authority over the unclean spirits (6:7). However, the power was not theirs, but was that of Jesus Himself. Ironically, it was the disciples who had failed to cast an unclean spirit out of a possessed boy (9:18), because they lacked faith in Christ. Jesus corrects the narrow-minded focus of the disciples, saying: “*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. For the one who is not against us is for us*” (v39-40). The person casting out demons in Jesus name was ‘on the side’ of Christ. The phrase ‘*for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me*’ is likely a gently phrased comparison between the effective ministry of the unknown exorcist and the ineffectiveness of the twelve disciples. All service, faithfully and sincerely rendered in Jesus name, is evidence of a person being a true disciple.

Jesus emphasises the wideness of the kingdom of God when He says: “*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*” (9:41). Even a smaller act of service, such as providing another disciple with some water to drink for the sake of Christ, evidences the servant heart of another disciple of the Lord. {Thank you, deacons, for the glass of water on the pulpit today!} Notice, that there is however, an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ in God’s kingdom as Jesus reveals when He says ‘*the one who is not against us is for us*’. Ultimately there are only two categories of people – those who belong to Christ and those who do not. Humble service for all kinds of other people is an evidence of belonging to the Lord.

In light of our text, we need to be careful not to be exclusive by questioning the service of others who do not belong to this church, or our denomination. It is true that some people who are not true disciples of Jesus may serve others and say and/or believe that they are serving in His name, when in fact they are not. We are wise to remember that we do not infallibly know the true heart of other people as God does (Acts 15:8).

The kingdom of God is much larger than any particular church or group of churches. The day is coming when we will see the extent of the church universal, a congregation of ‘*every tribe and language and people and nation*’ (Rev 5:9). On that day Jesus will perfectly separate those who belong to Him from those that do not, ‘*as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*’ (Matt 25:32). Do you know which group you will be in on the Day of Judgement?

Eternal life is exclusively for those who are true disciples of Jesus Christ, predestined for adoption into God’s family. We, however, are not to be narrowly exclusive in how we view other servants of the Lord. A high-ranking disciple humbly serves all others. A high-ranking disciple is thankful for, and accepting of, the faithful service of all other disciples of Christ. A high-ranking disciple is carefully gentle, which brings us to our third point.

1. **True greatness is carefully gentle**

The vulnerability of children is widely recognised today. Churches like this have ‘child protection policy statements’ written with the aim of safeguarding the young. This was not the way it was in 1st cent. Roman empire. Children were seen as having little importance and they were often treated with contempt and viewed merely as property. Children were valued not for who they were, but for their present or future contribution to the family business, especially for agricultural work. There was widespread child abandonment and murder of infants. Child abuse was a way of life and there was little or no protection for the vulnerable. In ancient Rome, fathers held absolute power over their children (expressed in the Latin phrase “Patria Potestas”). A father could condemn a child to die simply by commanding it be done. In a papyrus letter written by a man named Hilarion to his expectant wife, Alis, dated June 17, 1 B.C., he instructs her: *“﻿if it was a male child let it [live]; if it was female, cast it out.﻿”﻿*

The fact that children feature prominently in the ministry of Jesus is further evidence of His divine character. God cares deeply about the vulnerable, oppressed and needy (e.g. Ps 140:12). After revealing how to be truly great by being ‘*last of all and servant of all*’ (v35), Mark records that Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them and took the child in His arms. Jesus gently and tenderly embraced a child – the Greek word here indicates a little child – an infant. Then He said to His disciples “*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me*.” (v37).

Jesus is teaching a number of truths here:

* The disciples are to become like little children without pretentions to greatness, but rather have humble trust in Jesus – as we saw in our first point.
* The Aramaic term which Jesus would have used for ‘child’ also means ‘servant’ so there is a ‘play on words’ here. The disciples are not to be narrowly exclusive, but to receive all other servants of Christ, no matter how small or insignificant they may seem to be – as we saw in our second point.
* The Greek word translated ‘receive’ has the meaning ‘to welcome’. Just as Jesus carefully and gently welcomed a vulnerable child, so His disciples are to ‘serve all’ kinds of people, including the smallest, seemingly least significant and to serve them tenderly.

Jesus drives this third lesson home with a very strong warning in verse 42: “*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*”. The Greek word translated ‘little ones’ (micros) is the one we get the word ‘micro’ from as in microscope, microprocessor, microorganism. Micro means ‘very small’. The direct reference here is to other disciples who serve the Lord Jesus and to small children like the one Jesus took in His arms but this also includes the ‘small’, seemingly unimportant people in the world, the vulnerable, the outcast, the weak, the unattractive, the awkward, the difficult to get along with.

A truly great disciple serves all kinds of people and is especially careful not to cause ‘little ones’ to stumble into sin. A truly great disciple is carefully gentle with others, especially the vulnerable. Jesus stresses the seriousness of this by warning that those who are not carefully gentle with those who are weaker (this includes not only physically, but mentally, emotionally and/or spiritually) will suffer greatly. He uses a graphic image of having a heavy stone put around your neck and then being thrown into deep water to helplessly drown. This was the punishment inflicted by the Romans in Galilee on some of the leaders of the insurrection under the early Zealot leader, Judas the Galilean (ref. Acts 5:37).

We could unprofitably speculate on the nature of God’s punishment for rash, harsh ministry to others and get ourselves into all sorts of theological errors. The point here is that **the way we serve others and view other disciples of Christ, especially the weak and vulnerable is REALLY REALLY IMPORTANT. We are to serve others carefully and gently.** If you take that message home today, then you have been listening!

As we close, let’s think about ways in which you and I might be less than careful and less than gentle with others.

* We may be too quick to try and ‘fix’ people without understanding them and their situation well.
* We might forget that change often/usually takes much time both in ourselves and in others. God is patient with us, He calls us to be patient with others.
* We may be frustrated with others because they are, or seem, weaker than us.
* We may struggle to love others, especially those who are different from us.

Brothers and sisters, look to Jesus, your teacher who showed you how to serve. He gave His life as a ransom for yours and He calls you to be a high-ranking disciple, great in His Kingdom, humbly serving all others, including very much the weak and vulnerable. Not being narrowly exclusive but recognizing, and giving thanks for, the service of other Christians even though they may be in different churches and denominations, carefully and gently serving everyone, especially those who are different to you and perhaps more difficult to love.

Live your best life and aim high for a top ranking in Christ’s kingdom and remember that “*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all*”.

AMEN.