



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for Pentecost 18**

September 22, 2024

# Who Is the Greatest?

## Mark 9:30–37

<sup>30</sup>[The disciples] went on from there and passed through Galilee. And [Jesus] did not want anyone to know, <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “**The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.**” <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup>And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “**What were you discussing on the way?**” <sup>34</sup>But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “**If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.**” <sup>36</sup>And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“**Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.**”

It's a question that always wants an answer, and most people will try to give you one. Countless social media sites debate this question 'round the clock, and entire sections of daily newspapers, weekly periodicals, and monthly magazines are devoted to finding the answer. It's a question debated at home, at work, down at the pub, and even in church: Who is the greatest?

In the sports world, fans will debate if Arnold Palmer, Tiger Woods, or Rory McIlroy were the greatest ever to swing the clubs, or if Baltimore's Johnny Unitas or San Francisco's Joe Montana were the best at chucking a football. On the big screen, movie buffs will wonder if Clark Gable, John Wayne, or Tom Hanks were the greatest film actor of all time.

Closer to home – and (somewhat) closer to reality – there will be debates about who is the most popular kid in school, or who is the most successful at work, or who's the most beautiful – you name it. "Who is the Greatest" is a topic that comes up in nearly every facet of life.

In today's Gospel, we find that the disciples of Jesus could've sat in any sports bar, classroom, or at any kitchen-table, and fit right in. Only their debate wasn't about golfers, football players, or movie stars – they were debating about who was greatest in the kingdom of God!

Of course, a few of them had the inside track on greatness – at the beginning of chapter 9 in Mark's Gospel, we hear of Peter, James, and John going with Jesus up a high mountain to behold His transfiguration. Could it be that, having court-side seats to all of



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Jesus' miracles – from the feeding of the 5,000 to the Calming of the Storm, to the healing of the sick, to the raising of the dead – that such stupendous sights went right to their heads?

Every Sunday, millions of arm-chair quarterbacks and remote-control defenders recline in countless living rooms across this nation and around the world, and maybe, like so many of them, the disciples had begun to take credit for a winning score they had nothing to do with.

How fickle is our fallen, sinful nature. For wherever envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing come right along beside (James 3:16). We seem so intent, so fanatical about keeping score. Like the disciples, we all crave a certain amount of greatness, a certain level of status in our lives and in our communities. It seems we all want to be known for something – to be a somebody ... instead of a nobody.

Back in 1962, Muhammad Ali declared, "I AM THE GREATEST!" On a certain level, that may have been true. He really seemed to “float like a butterfly, and sting like a bee.” And he had the championship belts to prove it.

But, despite his greatness in the 60's and 70's, Muhammad Ali, later in life, became trapped – held hostage in his own body – beaten – not by another prizefighter, but by Parkinson's Disease. You see, that's the problem with greatness in this life: it doesn't last. For dust we are, and to dust we shall return (Genesis 3:19).

If no one else understood this, Jesus did. He seems to have gone out of His way to avoid any sense of earthly greatness. For example, after healing the demon-possessed man, He sternly ordered the demons not to make Him known (3:12). In raising Jairus' daughter from the dead, He commanded them strictly that no one should know about it (5:43). After healing the deaf-mute, Jesus commanded them that they should tell no one (7:36). And following His Transfiguration, as they came down from the mountain, He commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen, ‘til the Son of Man had risen from the dead (9:9).

Jesus never went looking for crowds – they came looking for Him! While searching for a place to be alone, He ends up feeding 5,000 people; so He leaves them and walks across the sea to Bethsaida, but the crowds follow Him there. So, from there He heads out to Gennesaret – yet the multitudes followed Him still, going through the whole countryside, carrying about on beds those who were sick to wherever they heard He was. Wherever He entered, into villages, cities, or the country, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged Him that they might just touch the hem of His garment (6:55-56). If anyone knew the wearying effects of having to endure man's idea of greatness, the Son of Man surely did!

So it is that throughout the Gospel of Mark we see Jesus avoiding this earthly "fan-club" type of following. Toward the end of Mark 7 we find Him entering a house and wanting no one to know it . . . but He could not be hidden (7:24-25). Constantly on the run,



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by today's Gospel we see how they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it (9:30).

Why? Why was Jesus avoiding the notoriety? Why did He try to elude all of the "greatness groupies"? Wouldn't the publicity help in getting His message out?

James (4:4) writes: Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Jesus knew that the multitudes who chased after Him and cried out for His miracles would soon be chasing after Him and crying out for His crucifixion! As He said to His disciples, "The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise on the third day." But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him about it.

Jesus was intent upon teaching His disciples the TRUE definition of greatness – the fact that greatness is not found in earthly scores or a "winning season" this side of heaven, but in being a servant – a suffering one at that – one who is going the way of the cross!

"If anyone wants to be first," He said, "he must be last of all and servant of all." Talk about strange! We usually give crowns, championship trophies, and gold medals to those who come in first. But Jesus' greatness would be marked instead with a crown of thorns, with HIS being raised up as a trophy by the Jews, with no gold or silver at all, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death!

Four hundred years ago, William Shakespeare wrote, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Jesus fulfilled all three! Where we are born in sin, HE was born sin-less! While our life and death amount to nothing – Christ's perfect life and all-atoning death achieved eternal salvation for all mankind!

Indeed, it was for this reason that all authority in heaven and earth was thrust upon Him by His Father – a greatness which He graciously shares with us! To demonstrate this to His disciples, Jesus reaches down to a little child – in those days, a nobody, not even worth counting – and announces that God's kingdom is about a different kind of greatness – the greatness of being made a Child of God! "Whoever receives one of these little children in My Name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives the One who sent Me."

God's grace is first given to us in our baptism. In this sacrament – through water and His Word – our Lord joins even the least and littlest among us to Himself – to His eternal greatness! Whenever we receive such a little one in His Name – Father, Son + Holy Spirit – we are receiving Him! By His grace, even the least among us becomes that which is greatest: a child of God, a member of His kingdom! To those who believe in His name He gives power to become the sons of God and has promised them His Holy Spirit. Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved!



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When Jesus asked the disciples what they were arguing about along the road, it's little wonder why they kept silent, for they had disputed who would be greatest among themselves. Yet before their Lord, what could they say? Compared to Him who had no sin, what greatness did they have to show?

Beloved: whenever we're tempted to debate who is greatest among ourselves, God grant that we learn by the disciples' example to remain silent! For truly, any greatness starts and ends with Jesus, doesn't it? I mean, He is the greatest, isn't He?

Paul writes to the Philippians, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by 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. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:3ff).

Who is greatest? There's no argument about it. He taught His disciples – and us – wherein true greatness lies – in the graciousness of God. And in Him – our blessed Savior – such graciousness abounds. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen