

The Gospel of Mark

(Mid-Week Bible Study)

Week 13: Greatness in the Kingdom of God -- Mark 9:30–50

Picture the road through Galilee. Jesus is walking with the Twelve, deliberately keeping a low profile because He wants to teach them privately. The lesson is the same one He gave at Caesarea Philippi, only now stated more bluntly. “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” (9:31). The disciples do not understand, and they are afraid to ask. They walk on in silence.

At least, they walk on in silence with Jesus. Out of earshot, the disciples have plenty to say. They are arguing about which of them is the greatest. Imagine the scene. Their Teacher has just told them again that He is going to be killed, and they are jockeying for position about who will sit closest to Him when the kingdom comes. When Jesus asks them what they were arguing about, they cannot bring themselves to answer. They know how it sounds.

What follows is one of the most subversive teachings in the Gospel. Jesus sits down, calls the Twelve, and says, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). Then He takes a child, sets the child in front of them, takes the child in His arms, and says that whoever receives one such child in His name receives Him, and not only Him but the Father who sent Him. The kingdom of God measures greatness in the opposite direction from every other kingdom.

He goes on. John blurts out that they have stopped someone else from casting out demons in Jesus’ name because the man was not following them. Jesus tells them not to stop him. He warns them about the eternal weight of causing a “little one” to stumble. He uses startling, unforgettable language about cutting off whatever causes us to sin. And He ends with a quiet sentence about salt: “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (9:50). Mark 9:30–50 reorders what we think the Christian life is supposed to be about. This week we hear Jesus tell us that greatness in the kingdom of God is not measured the way we have been measuring it.

Group Discussion: Right after Jesus told them again that He would be killed and would rise, the disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest. We can shake our heads at them, but the same impulse lives in every human heart, including ours. Where do you see the “who is greatest” conversation still happening today (in our culture, in our churches, in our families, in our own private comparisons), and what does Mark 9:30–50 teach about how Christ has come to break that pattern in His people?

Personal Reflection: Jesus took a child, set the child in front of His arguing disciples, and said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (9:37). Where in your own life is the

Lord calling you to receive someone the world considers small (an unnoticed family member, a difficult coworker, an inconvenient neighbor, a child, an aging parent, an overlooked person at church), and what would actually receiving that person “in His name” look like this week?

Read Mark 9:30–50

Study Questions

1. For the second time Jesus tells the disciples plainly, “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” (9:31). What does Mark tell us about how the disciples received this teaching (9:32), and what does it reveal about the difference between hearing Christ’s words and actually understanding them?
2. The disciples did not understand the prediction, but they were afraid to ask Jesus what He meant (9:32). Where in your own walk are there teachings of Christ or passages of Scripture that you have quietly avoided asking about because you suspect they will require something costly of you, and what would it take to bring those questions honestly into the light?
3. Jesus answers the disciples’ argument about greatness with one of His most striking sayings: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). Connecting this with Philippians 2:5–11, Matthew 20:25–28, and John 13:1–17, what is Christ teaching about greatness in His kingdom, and how does this reorder our understanding of what “success” looks like in the Christian life and in the church?
4. Almost every adult carries a private scoreboard, comparing themselves to others in some category (income, achievement, appearance, ministry, parenting, marriage, knowledge, popularity). What does your scoreboard usually measure, and what would it actually look like, this week, to take the lowest position rather than the highest one in that area?
5. Jesus takes a child in His arms and says, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me” (9:36–37). What is Christ teaching about how He is welcomed in the world, the high value of receiving the “least”, and the unity of receiving Jesus and receiving the Father in the small, hidden acts of love we offer to those the world overlooks (compare Matthew 25:31–46; James 1:27)?
6. Jesus pictures receiving a small child as the way we receive Him in the world. Who is the “small one” the Lord is asking you to receive in His name this season, what about that person makes them easy to overlook or postpone, and what specific act of welcome would change that this week?
7. John reports that they tried to stop a man who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name because he was not part of their group. Jesus tells them, “Do not stop him... for the one who is not against us is for us” (9:38–40). What is Christ teaching about the broader work of His name in the world, the danger of sectarian tribalism even among genuine disciples, and how we should rejoice in faithful work done by those outside our immediate circle while still holding firmly to the New Testament pattern?

8. Where in your own heart or in the way you relate to other Christians do you see tribal, exclusive instincts that need to be repented of, and what is the difference between faithfully following the New Testament pattern of the church and falling into the “because they are not following us” attitude Jesus rebuked?
9. In verses 42–48 Jesus uses some of the strongest language in the Gospel about both causing others to sin and harboring sin in our own lives. He speaks of a millstone and the sea (9:42), of cutting off a hand or foot, plucking out an eye (9:43–48), and of the unquenchable fire of “Gehenna” (9:43, 45, 47–48). What is Jesus teaching about the eternal seriousness of sin, the reality of final judgment, the urgency of decisive action against personal sin, and the great weight of how we influence those younger or weaker in the faith?
10. Jesus closes the section with, “Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (9:50). As you close this chapter, what specific “salt” do you need to recover in your own life (some lost distinctiveness, some lost flavor of holiness, some lost commitment to peace with others), and what step would put it back into your daily walk this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Philippians 2:5–11, the mind of Christ who emptied Himself and took the form of a servant; Matthew 18:1–14, Matthew’s fuller treatment of greatness, little ones, and the searching shepherd; James 1:26–27, religion that the Father accepts as pure and undefiled; Matthew 25:31–46, the King receiving His own through how they treated the least; Hebrews 12:14–17, pursuing peace and holiness with everyone.