

## Who is the Greatest? Ո՞վ է Մեծը

**Mark 9:30-37;42; 10:13-16**

It bothers me when I see wars occur between people or nations simply trying to see who can control the other, or in other words, who is the greatest?

It bothers me further when that happens in church life. How many individuals were offended by church disputes and left the church when they saw members and leaders trying to be the “greatest.” Let us see if Jesus has his opinion about those issues.

After Jesus explains what kind of Messiah He is, and after the Transfiguration experience (glory of Jesus), here I find Jesus again challenging his disciples concerning how to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Jesus. It seems there was a big argument among the disciples. The topic was: **“When Jesus leaves us, who will be in charge?”**

Let us see the context of this argument. Jesus one more time mentions his death and resurrection:

**They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 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.” But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.** (Mark 9:30-32 ESV).

Let us look to the map, we are on journey back to Galilee. We were in North Caesarea Philippi, now we are moving to the South. Jesus’ face is turning towards Jerusalem. He is talking about being arrested, by hands of “men” (one of the disciples), and he will be killed. Until now, the disciples are confused, and cannot understand that the Messiah will suffer, die and will be resurrected. They don’t understand, and they are afraid to ask. Yet, in this confusion they do something else:

**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.**

(Mark 9:33-34 ESV)

Again, let us see the map, we are in Capernaum, northwest side of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus asks them: What were you talking about?

They keep silent. Why? Embarrassed? Shamed?

What is the topic that they did not open their mouth?

Childish topic: Who would be the greatest?

In the next chapter we see James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who ask Jesus for a favor. **“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”** (Mark 10:37 ESV)

Seriously?...

The disciples were feeling great. Jesus chose them to be the disciples of **the Messiah**. They saw this as a privilege and most likely as prestige. Therefore, they were arguing who would be in charge if their teacher left them.

Jesus’ response was revolutionary.

**<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.”** (Mark 9:35 ESV)

Jesus sat down. That is a sign of a Rabbi who going to teach. Listen carefully.

Jesus teaching them (and us) the model of being a leader.

“He turned the values and the aspirations of all human beings upside down.”<sup>1</sup>

We want our place in society. We are someone important... We win always, not last, but first. Getting to the top is our goal.

Achievement is our goal, achievement and achievement....

Achievement is good, yet what is our goal in success or achievement?

**“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”**

This statement is based on Jesus’ teaching about being a disciple of Christ:

**If anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** (Mark 8:34 ESV)

**For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.** (8:35 ESV)

Deny the self: “Jesus does not ask disciples to deny something to themselves but to deny the self and all self-promoting ambitions.”<sup>2</sup>

What kind of leadership is this?

In theology we learn the **theology of glory** and **theology of the cross**. You see everyone wants glory without the cross. We want greatness without humility and servanthood.

**<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.”** (Mark 9:36-37 ESV)

A child, why a child?

Jesus chose the category of people which **society ignored** in those days.

-A child those days was nobody, until now in some areas...nobody

“Jesus chose a child to be His ambassador, His spokesman to the world. He chose a person of no significance and dignity. The lesson was obvious —the disciples were not to consider themselves great.”<sup>3</sup>

-Giving a whole lot of attention to children was not part of the Middle Eastern society. In many countries even today, children do not have a voice. Jesus embraced children, giving them a voice, the ones who do not have a voice.

-This is contrary to what the disciples knew.

The disciples wanted to establish hierarchy among themselves. And please just study church history, and you will see that the “church leadership” did not want to follow what Christ taught about being leaders, about being “great”.

Church, power, politics, hierarchy, all those terms corrupted the testimony of the church.

You see greatness is achieved in the spirit of **love and service towards God and each other**.

No wonder Paul encouraged the early church in the same principles:

**“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”** (Philippians 2:3-5 ESV).

Others are important...this is contrary to the standards of the world...

Illustration: On the news I saw a family of 9 who took in a woman who used to live across the street. She was lonely and her home needed serious fixing. The neighbors across the street were not rich; they were a simple, middle-class family, but strong in faith and caring. Two of the boys gave up from their room for this grandma. She enjoyed all the love and care she received. Eventually, some

organization came and fixed the home of the grandma which became really nice. She went back home but also took this entire family with her...

Greatness in servanthood?

While I was in the Bay Area having fellowship with pastors, I realized that many churches that are growing are using the **biblical way of leadership**. There is no hierarchy in the church. There is no senior pastor role. There are many pastors with different talents and roles, and each is discipling a group of people in the church, who themselves disciple others... and so on. It is very horizontal where community is stressed more than the leader.

**Jesus accepting the “weak” and giving them a voice.** During my 25 years in the ministry, I have been in different places. I have tried my best to hear the voice of weak ones. From the streets of Bourj Hammoud, of the Ainjar boarding school, back in streets of Amanos, then to SF, and now in Fresno.

One of my favorite heroes of faith is Mother Teresa. She says:

I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one. You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, 'Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.' So you begin...I begin. I picked up one person--maybe if I didn't pick up that one person I wouldn't have picked up 42,000. The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn't put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less. Same thing for you, same thing in your family, your community, your work, your school, your church--just begin...one, one, one.<sup>4</sup>

What kind of leadership is this?

**And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.**(Mark 10:13-16 ESV)

One more time I see disciples did not get it. As if the disciples were Jesus' bodyguards and police. “Please do not bother Jesus. Take your children away from here. They make too much noise.” But when Jesus saw what disciples did, he was indignant. The word **indignant** (*eganaktesen*) is Greek means “**to arouse to**

**anger**"; Jesus became extremely angry. No wonder neither Matthew nor Luke mentioned this word in their gospels. "Jesus' displeasure here reveals **his compassion and defense for the helpless**, vulnerable, and powerless."<sup>5</sup>

You see not only Jesus took the children and blessed them but he also gave them a voice, **"Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."**(10:15)

They are given as examples to teach us about the kingdom of God.

-Do you love weddings? Every time when I conduct a wedding, I witness how everyone gets nervous. Especially when the wedding entrance music starts, the parents of the bride and groom enter, then the bridesmaids and groomsmen. Everyone is trying their best not to make a mistake. Then suddenly the children enter, the flower girl and the ring bearer. They make mistakes; they do not walk right, and they go back and forward. Suddenly **the wedding becomes real**. The kids do not have masks. They are coming as they are (no political agenda).

I believe Jesus is teaching them and us an important lesson. **Children can be as innocent as one can think. But they also need Jesus.** [All are under the curse of sin.](#)

"In this story children are not blessed for their virtue but for what they lack; they come only as they are-small, powerless, without sophistication, as the overlooked and dispossessed of society. To receive the kingdom of God as a child is to receive it as one who has no credits, no clout, and no claims. A little child has absolutely nothing to bring, and whatever a child receives, he/she receives by grace on the basis of sheer neediness rather by any merit inherent in him/her."<sup>6</sup>

**Children come to Jesus empty-handed, desperately needing nourishment.** They cannot survive without the help of the adult.

**"Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts."** (Psalm 22:9 ESV)

David says he first learned to trust God as a little child, while he was being nursed. An infant totally depends in his mother's nursing. That is how we should come to God, totally deprived, powerless, without sophistication, empty-handed, poor, ready to be fed.

In the beatitudes we see Jesus stresses the point of coming to God poor in spirit: "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**" (Matthew 5:3)

We adults need to be reminded of this. No wonder Jesus gave their example. It is the only way we can enter the Kingdom of God.

### **What can we learn and do?**

1. **Learn from Jesus to be a servant-leader.** He washed the feet of his disciples.
2. **Check your ambitions and desires in achievements.** What are you doing? Who are you pleasing? What is your motive in accomplishments? Am I stepping over people while I am doing ministry?
3. **Do not ignore the weak and the "children" of the society.** Find the one who does not have a voice.
4. **To be in the Kingdom of God, Seek Jesus daily like a child.** Seek ye the first the kingdom of God...
5. **Know yourself in God's perspective. You are the Beloved Child of God** (this is your identity)

The way the world explains identity is self-promotion:

-I am what I Do.

-I am what I HAVE.

-I am what other people say about me.

The way Jesus defines our identity is: I am the beloved child of God, who cares for me, who shapes me, rebukes me, encourages me, helps me to understand that I am not in control, but God is.

No wonder Jesus said blessed is the poor, for they will inherit the kingdom of God. And blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Come empty...

Come poor...

Come hungry...

Come to be fed...

Come open so Jesus can shape you...

1. R.C. Sproul, *He Taught Them as One Who Had Authority* Mark, P 206
2. David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 327
3. R.C. Sproul, *He Taught Them as One Who Had Authority* Mark, P 207
- 4 Mother Teresa, *Words of Love* p79
- 5 James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* P 306
- 6 James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* p 307