

Title: Who is the Greatest?
Date: May 19, 2024
Subject: Followers of Jesus are to be humble servants.
Scripture: Mark 9:33 - 42

Things Jesus did that irritated people. Have the church family mention some.

Beginning of ministry when he said the prophecy from Isaiah had been fulfilled in him (Luke 4:16-30).

Calling the religious leaders “hypocrites”

stating he was God: he and the Father are one, “Before Abraham was, I AM”

performing miracles on the Sabbath

growing more popular - gaining crowds and being loved by them

There’s another time Jesus irritated the sensibilities of people. It was something he did publicly...in broad daylight. There were three parts to what Jesus did. First, he called a child to come among the adults. Oh my! Then he had the child stand right next to him, making the child the center of attention. Yikes! And then... Jesus had the audacity to pick up the boy and take him in his arms.

People couldn’t believe it. It shocked them. They couldn't believe their eyes. Things like that just weren't done. Jesus should have known better. Children should be seen, maybe, if they had to be. Definitely not heard. And definitely not part of public life. After all, they were kids, not really people.

Let's see what caused Jesus to act this way and how he made it a teachable moment. We’re beginning at Mark 9:33. I didn't put the reference in the sermon notes so you wouldn’t guess the irritating thing Jesus did.

Read Mark 9:33-37.

I. Concern over who is the greatest

We’ve advanced through the life of Christ so that there’s less than six months left before his rendezvous with the cross. Jesus had concluded his time in relative seclusion where he taught his disciples. One of the recent occurrences was Jesus being transfigured with Peter, James and John as witnesses. Jesus and his disciples arrived back in his headquarters in Capernaum and came to the house where they were staying. It was most likely Peter’s. Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the road?”

Nobody spoke. Not even Peter.

Somewhere on the trip back from Caesarea Philippi the disciples argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. The original word has the idea of discussing and considering, likely with an aggressive tone. It may have been a protracted discussion or something that continued to come up during their journey.

They’d heard Jesus speak a lot about the kingdom. Peter had correctly stated Jesus is the Christ of God, the promised Messiah who’d come and establish his kingdom. Jesus had taught about the need for people to deny themselves, pick up their crosses daily, and follow him. He concluded by saying “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:27).

What Jesus probably referred to was the Transfiguration when Peter, James and John would see Jesus in the glory of the kingdom that he'd possessed in heaven prior to coming to earth and to which he would return after his ascension. Another possibility is the special access God would give to John to see the future and record it in the book of Revelation.

However, the disciples weren't thinking in terms of Jesus dying, rising, leaving and then coming back in his kingdom. They didn't understand what Jesus was saying. The most likely scenario going through the disciples' minds was Jesus was ready to establish his earthly kingdom. The disciples were locked into the present.

They argued about the positions in the kingdom that Jesus would inaugurate any day. This could have been spurred by the Jewish mindset that every person should know their rank and maintain it. There was a lot at stake. Who wouldn't want to be the favorite friend and confidant of Jesus? There were all sorts of perks connected with being in the places of power.

Imagine what the argument sounded like as the apostles jockeyed for positions. There could have been jealousy against Peter, James and John for being the ones Jesus took on the mountain where the transfiguration took place. The other nine could have felt left out. Simon the Zealot may have made his case for being the greatest because he had the greatest transformation story – ruthless and rebellious Zealot turned into a follower of Jesus. Judas Iscariot could have pointed to the fact that Jesus and the others entrusted him with keeping the finances. John may have said “He loves me more than he loves you other guys.” Meanwhile, Peter, James and John had that special time with Jesus on the mountain as the ace up their sleeves.

Things are no different today in our competitive culture. Many people are motivated by the drive to be noticed, to come out on top. The thinking is – he who has the most gold wins, the one who has the most “likes” to their pictures and posts on social media is the winner. Lots of people tend to be glory seekers.

It happens among Christ followers. These may not be spoken but thought. “My spiritual gifting and the way I use them is better than yours. God loves me more because I'm more obedient in the big things. I don't sin like others do. I give more time and money. I pray harder for missions.”

Jesus knew what the disciples had been arguing about, but still asked the question. The disciples' response was to keep quiet, likely because they were embarrassed and hoped Jesus would just let it go.

Jesus didn't and he doesn't when he has something he wants to teach. He sat down as was the custom of rabbis of the day when they had a point they really wanted to make.

Reread v. 35. Luke's account adds: “for he who is least among you all - he is the greatest” (Luke 9:48).

The position for which we're to strive is: Be the very last. The servant of all. He who is the least among you all is the greatest.

Jesus would address these matters again. Just up ahead in the life of Christ, the disciples have another argument about position in the kingdom. The mother of James and John fanned the flames when she made her request to Jesus about her boys being at his right and left hand in the kingdom. Jesus says the kingdom isn't about gaining prestige, honor and positions of power. It's not about authority and lording it over others. There's

a higher priority, that of being the servant and the slave of all because he (Jesus, the Son of Man) did not come to be served but to serve (Mark 10:41-45).

Mark's Gospel presents Jesus as the Servant who came to do the will of God. The cross shows the greatness of Christ as he humbly took our place to die for our sins and provide the way for us to come into a right relationship with God.

Jesus, The Greatest, humbly served. Likewise, the greatest in his kingdom are those who serve. Like Savior, like followers.

Matthew 18 contains an expansion of what Jesus said. Read Matthew 18:2-4.

Jesus teaches that people enter the kingdom by changing and becoming like little children. Don't make things complicated. Simply trust that what Jesus says is true and act on it. Jesus stresses humility. "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4).

The disciples suffered from inflated egos. They magnified their value to Jesus. They were full of pride which is defined as "a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct" (dictionary.com).

Woven into the focus on children is a demonstration of a lack of humility by the disciples. They asked a man who was driving out demons to stop doing so because he wasn't one of them. Kind of ironic since they weren't able to cast the demon out of a young boy when Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:14-29). They didn't want the man to do what they hadn't been able to do.

Jesus informed the 12 they shouldn't stop him and that no one who does a miracle in his name is likely to turn away from him. Then he said, "for whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:38-41). Even though the man wasn't just like them, he was part of God's family. Then Jesus speaks about rewards for people who do kind acts in his name. "I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward" (Mark 9:41).

A writer from the time of the Puritans contrasted humility and pride: "humility is the ornament of angels and pride the deformity of devils" (William Jenkin). Pride is the opposite of humility.

Chuck Swindoll, pastor and writer from our times, describes the proud person as one "who has to come out smarter or stronger than you in order to be happy with you around. To see if you fit into this category, answer the following questions: 1. Do I drop hints that signal I know more about what's being discussed and those in charge? 2. Do I enjoy correcting factual errors in conversation? 3. Do I control an argument, looking for ways to show that the other person is at fault? 4. Do I make others feel guilty when I want a certain action?" (Seasons of Life, pp. 259, 260).

We could add other questions: Do I always have to have the last word in a conversation? Do I allow a person to share their good news without seeing if I can top them? It's the idea of rejoicing with those who rejoice. Or the opposite, when someone tells me about something bad that has happened to them, do I think or say, "You think that's bad? I'll tell you about bad."

Greatness isn't determined by the person who has the highest position, most achievements or best pedigree. Jesus teaches that greatness is determined by the attitude of serving with humility. The person is willing to take the lowest place.

I. Howard Marshall: *"There can be no question of "greatness" among the disciples, since the person who is prepared to act as servant has abandoned all desire for greatness (unless, of course, he is serving purely out of desire for greatness and thus hypocritically)...The disciples should forget their desire for preeminence and be content to serve the lowly who are truly great in the eyes of God"* (New International Greek Testament Commentary, Luke, pp. 397, 398).

Another source states "A person will become great as he sincerely and unpretentiously looks away from self to revere God" (NIV Study Bible note, Luke 9:48).

Pride can be sneaky. Pastor and author Francis Chan recalls speaking at a summer youth camp. "Afterward, a number of students told me I was their "favorite speaker." It felt good to hear them talk about how funny and convicting my messages were. I loved it. I got back to my room and thanked God for helping me speak so well. About 3 minutes into my prayer, I stopped. It hit me that the students were talking about *me*, not God. I was standing before a holy God and robbing him of the glory that was rightfully his. That's a terrifying position to find yourself in. God says, "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8). I realized immediately that any attention I received belonged to God. It's pride, plain and simple, that keeps me from giving God all the glory and keeping some of it for myself. It is a battle we all fight, in some form or another, some of us daily or even hourly" (Crazy Love, pp. 137, 138).

If Jesus used the methods common to the teachers of the day . . . he would have let the listeners chew on what he said for a little bit.

That's when Jesus did the unthinkable. Do a replay. The English language makes it sound kind of humdrum - "He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms . . . blah, blah, blah." But to the culture of the time, Jesus' action was earth-shattering, almost horrifying. The least significant in society, the lowest in rank, stood in the place of honor, right next to him, where the spotlight would be on him.

Jesus wasn't finished with the staging. He took the boy in his arms. There probably was some squirming, but not by the boy. It was the disciples who were all fidgety and didn't know what to do with their hands and feet and where to look.

The event is reproduced by artists to convey the loving nature of Jesus. There's much more to it. It was an active demonstration of humility. Jesus served the child by elevating him above other people. He welcomed the child.

Welcoming. Christians have been motivated by Jesus' words and actions. Christianity has been at the forefront of reaching out to the hurting and needy. In Jesus' name and for his sake, Christians have established hospitals, schools, orphanages, medical clinics to reach those who haven't had access. This hasn't replaced the mission of telling people the good news of Jesus Christ and how they can have eternal life. It's a supplement to the mission. Welcome people through meeting needs to be able to welcome them into the kingdom.

At the moment, Jesus' focus is on kiddos. One of the best ways we reflect Christ is by the way we treat children. We're to have open hearts towards them and open arms. We welcome them. Not just the ones that we raise in our families. . . but all children.

Depending on the survey, the percentage of people who come to Christ as Savior by the time they're 18 is between 63 and 77%. It's the time of life when foundations are established. They're more responsive to the good news of Jesus. That's why we invest so much time, talent, energy, and finances in welcoming children.

Jesus told the story of a man who owned 100 sheep and left the 99 to go find the one that wandered off (Matthew 18:12-14). The man finds the sheep and is happier about it than the 99. Jesus concludes the parable: "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost."

"The humble act of receiving one child in Christ's name is a deed of true greatness. It is this willingness to take the lowly position of service, even to a child in arms, which is the mark of genuine stature; For to do so is to render service to Christ and, through him, to the Father" (Wycliffe, Mark 9:36, 37).

Jesus has a harsh follow up that has more edge and heat.

READ Mark 9:42

Jesus doesn't take too kindly to people who mistreat and mislead children. The mistreatment could be abuse, neglect or indifference. Misleading is done through the example set before a child, direct teaching, scoffing at Christ and Christianity, labeling sin by other names. It would be better for this person to suffer the death penalty of a kind reserved for the worst criminals. The method would have horrified Jesus' contemporaries because there'd be no opportunity for burial.

The opposite is true for those who welcome and receive little children. "When we love a little child in the name of Christ, i.e., for His sake, and after His manner, we are sharers in His spirit, and when we love or receive Him who was one with the Father, we enter into fellowship with Him who is the Supreme and Eternal Love" (Ellicott Commentary, Mark 9:37).

Calvin Coolidge was the 30th president of the United States. Years before becoming President, he attended a dinner party hosted by Dwight Morrow, an influential businessman and politician. After Coolidge left, Morrow informed the other guests he thought Coolidge would make a good President. They disagreed. They felt Coolidge was too quiet, wasn't colorful, had a bland personality and therefore wouldn't be liked. Morrow's six-year daughter Anne spoke up: "I like him." Then she showed a finger with a small bandage. "He was the only one at the party who was *concerned* enough to ask about my sore finger. And that's why he would make a good President" (*Bits & Pieces, February 4, 1993, pp. 18-19*).

Doctor A.J. Cronin admired the "patience, fortitude and cheerfulness" of a nurse in England who single-handedly served a rural area for 20 years. He wrote, "She was never too tired at night to rise for an urgent call. Her salary was most inadequate, and late one night after a particularly strenuous day, I ventured to protest to her, "Nurse, why don't you make them pay you more? God knows you are worth it." She responded, "If God knows I'm worth it, that's all that matters to me.'" (Barclay Commentary, Luke, p. 129).