

Mark 9:30- 41

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[0 : 00] What is greatness? As Team GB climb the medal table in Rio, we're hearing a lot about greatness.

The very word greatness is one that's being repeated time and time again. Just this week, I've heard Bradley Wiggins, Sir Bradley Wiggins, described as Britain's greatest ever, Olympian, as he secured another gold medal.

Our own Catherine Granger was described when she secured her latest medal as Britain's greatest ever female Olympian.

But we don't want to be parochial. We look beyond our own borders. What about Michael Phelps? I think it was last night that he secured his 23rd gold medal over several Olympics.

The rather overused, in fact, dramatically overused adjective awesome does seem to apply in the case of that particular swimmer.

[1 : 15] And many would describe him and are describing him as the greatest ever Olympian. Though I would imagine there's a certain Usain Bolt in the whole of the population of Jamaica who might beg to differ on whether he is the greatest ever or not.

But we can look beyond the sporting arena. Greatness, of course, is not only to be found in the realm of sport. A few years ago, and this is several years ago, the BBC conducted a poll where people were asked to vote for the greatest ever Britain.

I think those kind of polls have been repeated. But there was one in particular that was conducted a few years ago. And of the alternatives, because I think we're given alternatives, it was Winston Churchill who came top of the poll as the greatest ever Britain.

And we'll come back to Churchill in a few moments. So, remain attentive if you want to hear a wee story about Churchill. Now, the passage that we've read there in Mark's Gospel has greatness as its theme.

We're presented, really, with two conceptions of greatness, two conceptions that are dramatically and diametrically opposed.

[2 : 35] We have greatness according to the disciples, which really equates to greatness according to the world. But in the context of the passage, it's the disciples who give expression to this particular conception of greatness.

So, greatness according to the disciples, but we also have before us greatness according to Jesus. And it won't surprise us to conclude that the disciples get it wrong, and Jesus nails it.

Jesus provides us with God's definitive portrayal and definition of greatness. And if we are disciples of Jesus, then we need to listen carefully to strive to be in sync with Jesus on this matter of what is greatness.

How can we be great in God's estimation? Now, it's worth making the point, as we turn to the verses read, that our focus this morning is going to be very specific, this matter of greatness. And in maintaining that focus, we will leave untouched and un-commented much in the passage. The passage doesn't only deal with greatness.

[4 : 00] I think it's its principle and central theme. But there are other subtexts and subthemes that we could usefully consider, but we're not going to do that because we're going to focus exclusively on this matter of greatness.

So, let's think about these two conceptions. First of all, greatness according to the disciples. And I think we can find in the passage and in the incidents that are recorded, I think we can find two core characteristics of greatness according to the disciples.

The first is that it exalts self, and the second, and they're very connected, is that it excludes others. These two key characteristics of greatness according to the disciples.

And we'll find that in the passage just in a moment. I suppose if you need to summarize those two elements, exalting self and excluding others, it's really captured in that infantile chant that maybe many of us have chanted in the past, I hope in the past.

I'm the king of the castle, and you're the dirty rascal. It's got the two elements. Exalting self, I'm the king of the castle, and excluding others. You're a dirty rascal.

[5 : 22] You're not a king. You don't belong in the castle. I do. So you exalt self, and you exclude others. And that's really what the disciples do. Well, let's see how they do that. But maybe before we identify how they do that, well, let's just go for it and think of that first aspect, exalting self.

Turn with me or look with me at verse 34. There in verse 34, we have recorded for us how they respond to a question that Jesus poses about why they had been arguing.

And we're told the answer, why it is that they don't answer, but they kept quiet, the disciples kept quiet, because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

So the disciples are arguing about this matter. Who among them is the greatest? Now, why did the argument arise in the first place on this particular occasion?

Well, we don't know, but I think we can suggest one or two possibilities that they themselves are instructive in understanding just what is going on. I wonder if part of the reason this became a reason for squabbling and arguing has something to do with what happened just a few days before when Peter, James, and John went up with Jesus to the mountain and were privileged to witness this amazing spectacle of Jesus being transfigured.

[6 : 59] You see, this is taking place immediately after that occasion. So Peter, James, and John, you can just imagine, they come down the mountain and it's been an amazing experience. And you can't for a moment imagine that they would have kept quiet about it as they speak with their friends, the other disciples, and so they say, it's amazing what happened.

And of course, the subtext is it happened to us, not to you guys. You weren't invited, but we were. And I wonder if there was something of that.

We don't know. We don't know. We're maybe being unfair on Peter, James, and John, but they're humans. They're like us. And I wonder if there's something of that in what's the background to this argument.

And not only the pride, perhaps, of Peter, James, and John, but the resentment of the rest. Why weren't we invited? Why were we left behind at the bottom of the mountain in all this misery and chaos?

And so the argument begins about who is the greatest. But I wonder if there's another explanation or possible explanation for the argument ever having taken place.

[8 : 08] And I wonder if it may have something to do with the fact that at this point in Mark's account, we really have the beginning of the final journey to Jerusalem.

And though it is true that the disciples didn't have a grasp in the measure that Jesus had of the timetable of events, I wonder if they were not beginning to realize that the mission of Jesus was reaching its climax.

Now, their conception of what that would look like, of course, was very mistaken. But nonetheless, this sense that something is coming to a head. Maybe there was in the disciples this expectation that in Jerusalem, Jesus would reveal Himself as the promised messianic King and establish a physical, visible kingdom there in Jerusalem.

And of course, the king would need a cabinet. Well, I don't know if kings have cabinets, but whatever the equivalent for kings is. And there would be jobs for the boys.

But what boys? And what jobs? And so there's this discussion. Who is the greatest? Who will be the prime minister? Who will be the chancellor of the exchequer? Who will be whatever?

[9 : 27] Who will be the greatest? Who will occupy the most important positions in the kingdom that Jesus would establish? Now, of course, this isn't entirely speculative because we know that on other occasions, this was precisely what the disciples argued and squabbled about.

The point is that on this road to Capernaum, whatever was the spark for the argument, each disciple argues his corner, each one exalting self in a desperate scramble to the top of the pile. Greatness, according to the disciples, involved exalting self. Now, in this, the disciples are simply being human. They're exhibiting their fallen human nature.

This is something that we see. And if we're honest, maybe we'd have to say that we participate in daily, in our workplace, in our homes, at school.

We see it in the world of politics and beyond. Exalting self. But I said that there was another aspect to greatness according to the disciples.

[10:37] Not only exalting self, but also excluding others. And for that, we turn to verse 38. We jump over Jesus' explicit teaching in the matter.

We'll come to that. And notice what is recorded there in verse 38. Teacher said, John, we saw a man driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop because he was not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said. And then we have the rest of the account, and we're familiar with it. We've read it a few moments ago. Now, this little section might appear quite distinct and even unrelated to this matter, this theme of greatness.

But I think the question of greatness is present in this little incident. You see, in this incident, John betrays the second characteristic of greatness according to the disciples, namely, excluding others. You see, there's this guy, and he's casting out demons. That's what we're told. John acknowledges that he was driving out demons in the name of Jesus. But John affirms he's not one of us.

[11:51] He's not following us. He's not part of our gang. He's not part of our circle. He's doing this. We can't deny he's doing it. He's obviously doing it successfully.

The demons were being cast out. But he's not one of us. And I don't think John is so concerned about the danger of an imposter as he is by the appearance of a challenger.

You see, I think sometimes we would read this incident and we would say, no, John is concerned for sound doctrine, for the purity of the church. And who is this guy? We don't know him. We don't know his credentials. You know, should he be doing this?

Is that his concern? Or is it rather, here's a challenger? You see, it's interesting. This is the guy doing precisely what the disciples had miserably failed to do in the previous incident recorded. We were thinking about it last week, the healing of a boy with an evil spirit. What did the father say to Jesus? I took him to your disciples, but they could not. But here's another guy, and he can.

[12:57] What they can't, he can. So here is a challenger. And in John's conception of greatness, you've got to exclude these challengers because there's only so many seats at the top table.

There's only so many thrones, and if he's going to get one, then maybe there won't be one for us. And if he gets the seat at the head of the table, well, where will I sit? And so I think behind John's concern, there is this characteristic of greatness greatness according to the disciples, excluding others.

For John, and often for us, the pursuit of greatness is like a game of musical chairs. The more folk that play, the less chance of winning.

So let's remove people from the scene. Again, are we so different? One of the unexpected gold medalists in Rio was a guy called Joe Clark.

Does anybody recognize that name? And if you don't, then it just confirms my point that it was unexpected. Joe Clark is a canoeist. He won gold in the slalom canoeing. You may have seen that.

[14:14] I don't know, was it three days ago? And the way that works is that the finalists all go down the course and their time. The one with the quickest time, of course, wins.

And the order in which they go down in the final race, not really a race, but the final run, is on the basis of their early rounds, how good they've been. So the best go last.

Okay? So the British guy was the third last to go. So he completed the course. He did well. He had a good time. But there were still two more. So he's in the gold medal position.

But if the other two go faster, then he'll be relegated to silver or to bronze. Now, the interesting thing was that after the race and the other two didn't go faster, he was interviewed.

And they asked him, so how did you feel waiting as the other two guys were coming down the course? And if you've seen the images, the competitors, they wait in their boat, in their canoe.

[15:10] They're at the bottom. So they're still very involved. And they're watching and seeing the screens and whatever they do to work out what's going on. So they said, how did you feel? And he said, well, you know, I was just sitting in my boat, and I'm paraphrasing, and I was kind of hoping they'd mess up.

Now, I admire the man's honesty. I'm sure that's what everybody thinks when they get interviewed, but they say nice things, but that's what they're thinking.

Well, he said what he thought, and they did mess up, and he won the gold medal. But you see, that's the conception. If I'm going to be great, others need to mess up. I've got to find a way of excluding others so that I can end up top of the pile.

Of course, it's not just Joe Clark. I don't want to be too heavy on poor Joe Clark, the boy done good. But are we so different when it comes to exam results?

I won't mention names, but somebody who got exam results this week, was it this week? Yeah, it was this week. One of his great concerns was, I wonder what my pal got in English. And I'm, so I actually, in my naivety, I asked him, well, what, does he need a really good mark?

[16:23] No, I just want to make sure I got more than he did. You can guess yourselves who that was. It's not difficult. In the event he did, it wouldn't have been true of many of the other subjects, but in this subject it was.

Are we so different? Exam results, appraisals at work, penalty shootouts. You know, when your team's in a penalty shootout, come on, you want the other guys to miss. You don't just want your team to score, you want the other ones to miss.

That's the way it is. That's the way we are. Greatness, according to the disciples, involves exalting self and excluding others.

But we need to move on to what really interests us a lot more, and that is greatness according to Jesus. Now, before we consider Jesus' conception of greatness, we do need to be clear about something very important.

Jesus is not opposed to his disciples, that would be you and me, also the twelve, of course, there, not opposed to his disciples aspiring to greatness.

[17:25] Jesus wants his disciples, he wants us, to be great. He wants us to be the best we can be, to reach the summit, to excel, to shine, whatever language you want to use.

The issue is that Jesus has a radically different conception of what greatness is and what it looks like. And we can divide what we have to say with regard to greatness, according to Jesus, in three parts.

The example of greatness, the example of greatness that Jesus himself gives us, the challenge to greatness, also given to us by Jesus, and then finally, the reward of greatness that Jesus identifies. This is all under the umbrella of greatness, according to Jesus. First of all, the example of greatness. What I'm suggesting to you this morning is that verses 30 to 32, where Jesus announces his imminent death, in these verses, we have the key to understanding greatness according to Jesus, according to God.

This is what the disciples are rejecting. When Jesus says, I'm going to die, I'm going to be crucified, they say, no, no, we don't want to hear that. That doesn't fit in to our paradigm of greatness.

[18:44] So they reject it. But within that key announcement, that passion prediction, we have a key and a telling word, verb used by Jesus.

Just turn with me there to chapter 9 of Mark, and in verse 31, he said to them, the Son of Man, the Son of Man, is going to be betrayed into the hands of men.

Let's just pause there. That's sufficient for our purposes. Now, the word there, translated, betrayed, and as I read the passage, you may have noticed I gave an alternative, delivered up.

The actual word that is used literally is delivered up. Now, you can understand how in context that could mean, and indeed on occasions does mean betrayed. Of course, betrayed implies malicious intent, but the verb itself does not require malicious intent.

It simply means what it says, delivered up. Also, interestingly, in the words of Mark, it is in the present tense. So what Mark says in recording what Jesus said is that the Son of Man is being delivered up to, and then we find out what?

[19:58] To death. In what follows. Now, of course, if that's the way we are to understand it, and I would suggest it is, it's interesting that not only do other versions of the Bible, other translations, opt for delivered up, even the NIV, which is the Bible we're using, the version we're using, in its more recent editions, has opted for that verb, delivered up.

Now, where am I going with this? Well, the question is, who does the delivering? You see, if Jesus is saying is that he is being delivered up, there is a subject there that is unstated.

Who is delivering him up? Now, obviously, when you use the word betrayed, that points you in a direction. It's got to be a bad person because bad people betray. But that's not what's being said here, I would suggest.

Rather, what Jesus is acknowledging is that he is being delivered up. By whom? By the Father. You see, this is what the teaching of the Bible consistently presents to us, that Jesus was delivered up, fought us, by the Father.

It is the Father who hands him over to death. It is the Father who ordered this whole road en route to Jerusalem and to Calvary. He is delivered up by the Father.

[21 : 16] And greatness, the mark and measure of greatness, which is our concern, is the obedient acquiescence of Jesus to the Father's will and purpose.

Here is the example of greatness. Jesus submitting to the Father's will. Indeed, in this example of greatness, we can maybe distinguish two related aspects.

And the first is that willing submission to God's will. This is greatness. To willingly submit to God's will, however difficult, however painful, whatever suffering it might involve, to willingly submit.

This is greatness in the estimation of God. But related to that, and we have it in what Jesus did as he was delivered up, not only willing submission to God's will, but loving service to others.

Jesus was delivered up in the saving service of others. And we know this from his own lips. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[22 : 27] This is greatness. Submission to God and service to others. This is counter-cultural. This is radical. This is a whole new and in the opinion of many scandalous conception of greatness.

Submission and service. You can imagine just how repugnant such an idea would be to many. How can that be greatness to submit and to serve?

I said I'd give you a wee story about Winston Churchill, so here goes. The source I have is a seemingly credible one, though you never know with things you read about people who lived so long ago.

But the story is told of a servant of Churchill and this servant grew tired of the harsh and demanding manner in which he was treated by his master.

And one day the servant lost it and he responded brusquely, maybe rudely, to Winston Churchill. Now Churchill was not impressed and he reprimanded him.

[23 : 39] Remember, we're talking here about somebody who's been voted the greatest ever Britain. He reprimanded him. How dare you speak to me like that? The servant, you know, he'd reached a point where he was past caring, so he just answered in kind.

He said, well, I'll tell you why I speak to you like that, because that's the way you always speak to me. And then Churchill stood back and said, ah, yes, but I am a great man.

So the story goes. Not his finest moment. But you see, the conception of greatness that is evidence, that is betrayed by that response of who many would consider and indeed, with good reason, to have been a great man in many ways.

But it seems that he was a bit like the disciples in his conception of greatness. But Jesus' conception, as demonstrated by his example, is that greatness is to be found in submission.

Submission to the Father's will and service to others. But moving on from that, we also have what we're calling the challenge to greatness. And the challenge to greatness is provided by Jesus by means of instruction.

[25 : 03] His willing submission is the manner in which he teaches us by example, by this powerful example. But he also teaches us on the matter by specific instruction.

And his instruction pinpoints two features of greatness that are very related to what we've already seen, but we can draw and consider just a little bit separately.

And the two features of greatness that we find in Jesus' instruction are, first of all, loving the insignificant and then doing the insignificant, which, of course, are also very connected.

Where do I get that from? Well, Jesus begins his instruction by laying down his essential thesis in verse 35. You know, sitting down, Jesus called the twelve and said, and he declares this opening gambit.

This is what greatness is as far as I'm concerned. He says, if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all. So that's the bold statement. But then he goes on to develop that.

[26 : 11] He develops it by means of specific instruction, but then also by means of incidental instruction as something happens that he can respond to. But first of all, he develops it by means of specific instruction.

And that concerns loving the insignificant. Then in verse 36, we find how he does that. Jesus took a little child and had him, that is the little child, stand among them, taking him in his arms.

He said to them, whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but the one who sent me. I think the idea there does

not only welcome me, but welcomes also the one who sent me.

Now, let me ask you a question. You do a little bit of work right now. In this verse, who is being presented as great?

Who is the one who is being presented as exhibiting greatness in what happens there in verse 36? What do you think? Give you a time to cogitate on the matter.

[27 : 26] I think instinctively, I can only speak for myself, but I think instinctively we sometimes think, well, it's the child. You know what Jesus is doing? He's saying, you people think kings are great and emperors are great and people with lots of money are great, but I don't.

I think little children are great. It may well be that Jesus thinks that. It may well be that Jesus considers children to be very important and great, but I don't think that's what he's saying here. The one who is being presented as exhibiting greatness is Jesus himself because he's the one who receives the insignificant. He's the one who loves the insignificant.

This little child who he can carry in his arms, so that gives you an idea of the size, the age of the little child, perhaps a toddler. Now, we live in an age when we think very highly of toddlers, and rightly so, but I think in the time when Jesus lived, you know, little children were almost, you know, potential humans.

They weren't considered of any great importance, and Jesus says, greatness is exhibited by the one who receives the insignificant, who receives those who are marginalized, who values those who are considered of no importance and of no value.

[28 : 43] There is greatness to be found. Jesus is the one who is exhibiting greatness, and challenging to greatness in this little drama that he engineers here for his disciples.

Loving the insignificant. Well, is that a characteristic that we find in ourselves? Do you love, and welcome, and receive, and value, and give your time, and energy, and effort on behalf of the insignificant, those deemed of no value.

And you can work out for yourselves who those would be in our society. Loving the insignificant, but there's another aspect to the challenge of Jesus, and that is the challenge to do the insignificant.

And we move back to that little incident of the guy casting out demons, and how Jesus responds to John's concerns. They're from verse 38.

This guy, he's driving out demons. Jesus says, don't stop him. And then in verse 41 in particular, as he is continuing to deal with this matter of this man and John's concerns, listen to what Jesus says there in verse 41.

[29 : 59] 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. This is what we're calling the incidental instruction.

Jesus takes advantage of this occasion to drive home this element of greatness, namely, doing the insignificant, giving a cup of water.

Now, it would be difficult to imagine, difficult to conceive of something simpler than giving a cup of water. It's difficult to imagine anything more straightforward, even menial, than giving somebody a cup of water.

But Jesus presents such a task, such an action as evidencing greatness. The willingness to do that which is insignificant, the desire to serve in a way that anybody else would consider of no volume is, in the estimation of Jesus, a measure and an evidence of greatness, doing the insignificant.

significant. There's a wee boy in this congregation who, it'll be much more difficult for you to work this one out in terms of who it is, but he was being asked by his mother to do some, to help in the house, some chores in the house.

[31 : 25] And he wasn't very keen on the chores that had been given. I think it was maybe to wash the dishes. This, by the way, this is not in the man's. This is, this is in another home. And he didn't want to do the chores that he'd been given, but it was really entertaining, really, was the answer that he gave.

He said, Mommy, I can help you, but I want to do a more important job. So, yeah, I can help you, but not washing dishes.

Give me an important job and I'll do it. But not this menial stuff. You know, that's not for me. You see, there, a wee boy, and he's got that conception of greatness.

Menial tasks, great people don't do those. But Jesus says, no, that's precisely what great people do. They give a cup of water, they do the menial task, they do that for which they won't be congratulated or at least by others rewarded and acknowledged.

They do the insignificant. The challenge to greatness. And finally, we draw things to a close with what Jesus says concerning the reward of greatness.

[32 : 34] In verse 41, there is specific reference to reward. 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.

I think in the matter of reward, we can distinguish between the promise of reward and the nature of the reward. There in that verse, verse 41, we find the promise of reward.

Jesus doesn't say what the reward is. But the very recognition that there is a reward dignifies and ascribes greatness to the act. The act of giving that cup of water is exalted by Jesus by saying, there is a reward for that.

Why? Because that is, in God's estimation, greatness, and it will be rewarded. So there's the promise of reward. But also, we have in verse 37, a description of the nature of the reward.

What is the reward? What is the reward for greatness in the opinion of Jesus? We know what it is in the opinion of the disciples. The reward for greatness is status and power and wealth and popularity and success and all of these things.

[33 : 46] But in the opinion of Jesus, what is the reward for greatness? It is something of inestimably greater worth, the approval and friendship of God.

Listen to what Jesus says there in verse 37. Because in verse 37, we have what you might call a golden chain that leads into the very embrace of God.

Because in verse 37, what Jesus says is, whoever welcomes the insignificant little child in so doing, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

And so there's this chain. The one who does this insignificant thing of welcoming, of receiving a little child in so doing welcomes Jesus and in so doing welcomes and enjoys the fellowship and embrace of God.

This is the reward. Let's go back to the Olympics one final time. The gold medal that was hung around the neck of Mo Farah in the wee small hours of this morning.

[35 : 03] As far as I know, the medal ceremonies already happened. I don't actually know that for a fact. But when I first typed this out, I put Jessica Ennis and then I had to change it. Because sadly, there was no gold medal for Jessica Ennis.

But the gold medal that hangs around or will hang around the neck of Mo Farah, here's a wee bit of useless information for you. It's made up of 494 grams of silver and bathed in 6 grams of gold.

Now, I don't know if that qualifies for a gold medal. Six measly grams of gold and nearly 500 grams of silver. But that really rather unimportant detail does remind us of the ultimately superficial nature of every reward offered and even delivered by the world.

Bathed in gold. but just that, only bathed. How wonderfully and eternally superior the reward enjoyed by disciples of Jesus who follow the example of Jesus joyfully submitting to God's will and joyfully serving others.

To the disciples of Jesus who rise to the challenge that he presents to us of loving the insignificant, and doing the insignificant, this great reward of the approval and friendship of God himself.

[36 : 44] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the manner in which it comes and addresses those matters that occupy our attention and concern.

we are of those who are so often preoccupied by our worth and value, how good we are and how great we are and how we compare to others, whether we're better or worse, whether we're fitter or more beautiful or whatever it is.

And we thank you that we turn to your word and we are reminded of what you ascribe greatness to, what you consider to be great.

And we do pray again that our great concern would be your estimation, that our great concern would be that you would look upon us and enable us to live lives that are great in your sight and pleasing to you.

And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.