

## The Cross-Shaped Life #1 – Greatness

Mark 9:30-41 – BPC 19/11/2023

What is the greatest movie of all time? Well according to most polls the answer is...

But of course for everywhere that a movie is awarded #1 status there are 5 sites arguing why that isn't the case! And of course it raises the important question of what criteria would we possibly use to determine it?

Is the amount of money it makes, hours watched on a streaming service, rotten tomato score, most original idea or story, the influence its left, or most diverse fan-base and so on.

Have you ever noticed how obsessed our world is with greatness? Whether it's movies, sporting teams or players, songs, or even political leaders, the question of greatness is an annual debate.

Almost every sporting code has an annual award to crown the best player, which inevitably begins the argument of the greatest of all time. Is it Lebron or Jordan, Federer or Djokovic, Matthews or Ablett.

A concern for greatness, a desire for greatness is intrinsically bound with all forms of sport and might say any form of competition. But I think this shouldn't really surprise us because the desire for status, recognition, or praise; for greatness; naturally flows out of the human heart.

It's why we find ourselves instinctively comparing ourselves to others; why we are highly selective about what we post online or share about ourselves, it shapes the decisions we make like which university or school, job, clothes, tech, or anything else that we think will give us the feeling of status or recognition from others that we so desperately crave.

And in our passage tonight, in Mark 9, Jesus addresses the question of greatness head on and what might surprise us is that Jesus doesn't dismiss that craving or tell us to flee greatness! In fact he seems to be all for it but in the most surprising, inverted, upside-down Gospel kind of way.

You might recall that throughout this series in Mark we've highlighted that the Gospel breaks neatly into two sections: chapters 1-8 have constantly raised and answered the question "who is Jesus?" which all culminated in Peter's confession at the end of chp 8 that he is the Christ – the Messiah – that OT promise of an anointed King who would sit on David's throne and rule all nations.

And over the past few weeks we've seen that status confirmed as Peter, James, John, went up the mountain and were given a glimpse of Jesus' divine glory as he was transfigured before them and God himself spoke calling us to listen to him.

And we now come down the mountain Jesus is going to take his disciples on a journey, they are on the way to Jerusalem where Jesus will suffer and die. And Jesus uses this journey to do some focussed discipleship training.

We see that in v.30 as they leave, making their way through Galilee but Jesus doesn't want the crowds and commotion, he wants just him and his disciples for a clear purpose in v.31: to teach them.

And so this focussed discipleship training on the way to Jerusalem will occupy the rest of Mark 9 and all of chp 10 before they arrive in Jerusalem in 11:1. Jesus wants them to grasp two key things: what kind of Messiah is he and how will this shape how they follow him.

And you may recall that this isn't a new idea! In chp 8, Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ then Jesus immediately told them of his own suffering and what following him would look like: Denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following him (Mk 8:34). But now in chp 9, as they come down the mountain with the glimpse of Jesus' divine status and glory fresh in their minds, Jesus again brings them back that central reality: he is a suffering Messiah.

*<sup>31</sup> For he was teaching his disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after he is killed, he will rise three days later."*

As they head to Jerusalem they head to Jesus' certain suffering and death and Jesus wants them to know this isn't some unfortunate outcome due to his controversial opinions, he's not merely a victim of power-hungry men who don't like his influence, he has come to die, it is his divine mission.

And I suspect that for most us that's hardly shocking. In fact you might think this really is Gospel basics, Jesus came to die. But we have to remember how shocking and counter-intuitive this would have sounded to those first disciples.

Jesus calls himself here the *Son of Man*, a reference to the strange figure in the vision of Daniel 7 who is somehow both human yet divine as he receives from God authority to rule over all nations, for all time. And these disciples are sure that Jesus is that Son of Man.

They've seen his power from God to heal the sick and drive out demons, three of them have just come down the mountain of transfiguration with that image of his divine splendour no doubt still clear in their eyes and the voice of God himself still ringing in his ears.

They have no doubt, this is the Son of Man, this is God incarnate, this is the Messiah come to save, but how will he do it? Well through rejection, suffering, and death.

And that really is odd. It's like finally making it and being drafted to the footy team of your dreams and being told the strategy is to throw every game. Or enlisting to the army and the decorated general says the plan is to run straight into enemy territory unarmed and die. It's completely odd.

So why is that Jesus' saving strategy? Well because that's the saviour we need. Jesus says he'll be *betrayed*, or better translated, *delivered (ESV) into the hands of men* to die. It's language taken straight from one of the clearest, most wonderful, yet most confronting OT promises in Isaiah 53.

There in both v.6 + v.12 we are told that the servant of God will be delivered, using the same word Jesus uses. And there are two shocking elements about this reference: firstly, the servant of Isaiah 53 is delivered over to death by God. And secondly, he is delivered to death by God in our place.

Because we are like sheep that go astray in v.6, prone to wonder, prone to reject, ignore God, to sin against our loving God and the servant will die, v.12, to bear our sins, because of our iniquity.

Our sin leaves us exposed, guilty, and worthy of God's judgement in eternal death, and Jesus says I've come to take it for you, I'll be delivered over to death in your place. Despite hearing for it the second time the disciples are too afraid to say anything in v.32.

God himself has come amongst us so we can know and have access to him forever, but only by dying in our place first. It's little wonder that they are silent and Jesus will tell them a third time in chp 10!

And so for us while we may be familiar with the idea and words of a crucified Lord we must not let them lose their majesty and wonder. "My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part but the whole; Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more; Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, o my soul!"

But what Jesus says next shows us that the measure to which we get this or not will actually be seen in how we respond. This is made explicitly and awkwardly clear as Jesus has a question for the disciples in v.33. They are now in Capernaum and Jesus brings up an argument they've had.

And contrast is meant to be disturbing. As Jesus finishes teaching them again of his impending rejection and death, they've been debating which of them is the greatest! It's no wonder in v.34 that no one is willing to answer him but the problem with Jesus is he knows!

Now maybe this has been on their mind since the transfiguration. Why was it only 3 of them got to go up the mountain? Why couldn't the others cast out the demon as we heard last week? Or maybe it's just that as they've grasped more of Jesus' identity they are want to make sure they are first in line for the spoils of following the divine Son.

Who is the greatest amongst us? It's an unimaginable question in light of Jesus' own suffering right? Could you imagine Neil walking around the hall at supper putting out arguments all over the place as people debate who is the greatest is here at Bundy. It's unthinkable right?

But perhaps what is unthinkable for us is that we'd actually voice it with others, not that we'd actually think it or have concern for it. You see more than our concern which movie or athlete is the greatest is our desire to make sure we get recognition or praise or sufficient status.

We know the frustration, hurt, or anger when we aren't acknowledged the way we think we should be. Whether it's the promotion or award in our workplace or just even just being not asked to be involved in something at church.

I think we get that desire, the disciples clearly do, and so as they are ashamed and silent, Jesus sits in v.35, assumes his favourite teaching position, and calls the disciples to himself and says, don't ignore greatness, but be truly great: *"If anyone wants to be first, he must be last and servant of all."*

True greatness is being the servant of all. Of looking to what benefits, serves, encourages, enables others. And it won't be passive, it will activity look what is needed and respond. You see the life shaped by the cross of Christ follows his example in the costly, self-sacrificing service of others.

And so following Jesus and living the cross shaped life challenges our self-importance and desire for recognition far more than it warns us about suffering or dying for Christ. Greatness is service. And Jesus illustrates the point:

*<sup>36</sup> He took a child, had him stand among them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> "Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but him who sent me."*

When Jesus picks up a child we might naturally think that's normal, expected, and kind of cute. But the 1<sup>st</sup> century was not so child obsessed the way we are. Children were not idealised as cute, innocent, or our hope for the future. No children were a picture of weakness and vulnerability. They had a low social status, they were under the authority of someone else, completely reliant on others.

And Jesus embraces a child as a picture of service because it was unexpected and against the social standard because a child could in no way repay or benefit you and doing so wouldn't improve your social status or reputation. Jesus-like service looks to the needs of others not what it benefits you.

You do it because of and for Jesus, *in my name* says Jesus v.37 because in welcoming the child you are actually welcoming not just Jesus, but the Father who sent him. We welcome, we embrace, we serve the outcast and the needy because Jesus is calling the shots in our life and it pleases him.

And as I think about that I immediately know I want to be in a community, in a church, that does that well. That embraces, serves, cares for the needy, the vulnerable, the outcast. But even as I imagine how good it would be I know that instinctively I don't want to be at the coalface of doing it.

To be great by being the servant of all flies in the face of my natural instincts: where I sit, who I speak with over supper, events I attend, how I serve, and what roster I join are all governed by what is comfortable and convenient by putting myself first. And I suspect you feel that too because it's so embedded into our culture that has glorified selfishness by saying look out for yourself!

Be true to yourself and let no one rob you of the good, authentic, pleasurable, self-absorbed life. But the cross-shaped life inverts all that because we follow a servant, crucified Lord. And so we serve, we look for the needs of others to welcome, embrace, encourage, and give.

And this need really is all around us. In fact the very definition and nature of church tells us this doesn't it? This is the gathering of those who have nothing in common but our acknowledgement of our neediness before the holy God. A gathering of the employed and unemployed, wealthy and poor, struggling and thriving, retired and student, single and married, young and old.

In each of these statuses or stages of life have need. And so in a community of believers there will be financial needs, loneliness and health struggles, there will be the need for encouragement and support, someone to talk to and pray with, or even just to answer our questions.

And putting yourself last is deeply practical. It will be an eagerness to listen to others more than speak. It will mean generosity, compassion, visiting, caring, and calling even when inconvenient. It will get in contact when others are away and follow up when people are struggling.

And the cross shaped life embraces true greatness by serving others for Jesus and because of Jesus. And so understanding that Jesus will be rejected, suffer, and die is not merely intellectual or theological, but deeply hands-on as it causes us to look to the needs of others and act.

But it must also be seen in our unity. Jesus makes this point as it is again John who pops up to reveal where he and the disciples are at: <sup>38</sup> *John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us."*

Now on the surface this could be both a sincere and helpful action by John. It was common at the time for many people to attempt to cast out demons, whether Jewish or any other religion, and many would invoke any name of any so-called god or power to achieve it.

We get a somewhat humorous example of this in Acts 19 as some travelling Jewish exorcists attempt to cast out demons in Jesus' name, it doesn't work, and they get beaten up for their troubles!

So on the surface perhaps John is concerned for the authenticity of the Gospel, for the reputation of Jesus that could be smeared by this pretender.

And we don't know anything about random exerciser of demons except that he's certainly not part of the 12 disciples or even familiar to them. But sadly that doesn't appear to be John's concern at all.

Notice John's issue is not that he doesn't follow Jesus, he probably does, but that he casts out demons but doesn't follow us. And maybe this guy was especially stinging for John and the others as he casts out demons, the very thing they just failed to do in v.18.

And so here he comes exercising demons and they think who is this guy? He's not one of us! How dare he! And as John says, they try to stop him. But *no* says Jesus. Why would you? <sup>39</sup> *"Don't stop him... because there is no one who will perform a miracle in my name who can soon afterward speak evil of me."* <sup>40</sup> *For whoever is not against us is for us.*

Jesus uses two pretty simple logics: firstly, if he invokes my name to cast out a demon, and it works, it seems unlikely he'll then turn around and slander me. And secondly, if he isn't against us, he's for us.

And that second one might really surprise us? It seems a bit broad and open ended doesn't it? Especially if we remember that Jesus warned that not all those claiming to serve him really are (Mt 7).

And we may especially find this odd if we recall that Jesus seems to say the opposite thing in Matthew 12: <sup>30</sup> *Anyone who is not with me is against me, and anyone who does not gather with me scatters.*

And Luke's gospel has both of these sayings from Jesus so clearly they aren't contradictory or mutually exclusive! So what are we to make of this? Well the context matters. When Jesus says whoever is not with me is against me in Matthew 12, it is in response to the Jewish leaders who are accusing him of being a ruler of demons because of his ability to drive out demons.

They are seeing and experiencing his ministry and ultimately deciding that he is wicked, not worth

trusting, and they reject him. But in our passage, Jesus says *whoever is not against us is for us* not in the context of turning to Jesus, but of doing ministry in his name.

So when it comes to our response to Jesus in Matthew 12, Jesus warns that there really is no middle ground. You can't be kind of ok with Jesus, he's either your Lord or not, with him or against him.

But when it comes to our treatment of others labouring in Jesus' name, we are to be generous and inclusive. I think Paul models this in Philippians 1 when he says some even preach Christ our rivalry and envy – preaching to show up Paul and even cause him trouble (Phil 1:15-16).

Yet his conclusion is in v.18, *what does it matter? Only... that Christ is proclaimed* and because of that he will rejoice. You see because the point is what honours Jesus, not himself.

John wanted to stop this guy casting our demons because his issue was not whether it glorifies Jesus but what this guy's ministry will do to him! He's worried about status or recognition as this random outsider does the ministry the inner circle couldn't! What's totally lacking is any joy and appreciation that Jesus' work is being done as people are liberated in Jesus' name which ultimately honours Jesus.

Gospel unity should be your priority because it will honour Jesus and will even be good for you:  
*<sup>41</sup> And whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you belong to Christ —truly I tell you, he will never lose his reward.*

This is the cross-shaped life, where we unite and encourage and serve because we motivated by the example and priorities of Jesus, rather than absorbed with our own status and recognition.

And yet sadly so many Christians and churches, especially of the Reformed Evangelical frame, have been quick, joyful, and perhaps even at times smug as they reject, dismiss, and even despise Christians who do it differently from them.

Now even as I say that I know that there will always be the need to clarify and separate on essential matters. But perhaps at times we've been too eager to divide or slander where there is a lot of room for generosity and unity because ultimately Christ is preached and honoured.

But this kind of self-forgetful unity that is focussed on what honours Christ, preaches the Gospel, and builds up his church is essential for us even as we gather together as the one church week to week.

Because even in our lives together as a church we can so easily make it all about ourselves, fuelled by the desire for status and recognition that is so destructive to our joy in Jesus but also our fellowship. It puts us almost in competition with other Christians.

Where we constantly question why others were asked to serve in a role instead of me, or are frustrated by the praise or recognition others receive. And it can be slow and at times subtle yet it turns into destructive mentality where everything is about us and never about Jesus.

It makes us jealous not thankful, sceptical rather than encouraging, reserved rather than inclusive. And it's just totally exhausting because we want to control everything and feel we always have to prove ourselves or filter every decision on how it relates to us.

Yet the cross-shaped life says greatness is being the servant of all, self-sacrificial service to those who need it when it won't benefit us, even when other's don't notice or recognise it at all, yes even when you weren't asked to do it.

And I think we know that a church like that will be so good to be a part of, such a powerful witness to an unbelieving world and with adorn the Gospel. But so how do we get there when it is so counter-intuitive to what our world says and values? So different to perhaps our default desire to spend our time and energy on those that will benefit and help us?

Well we have to keep coming back to the cross where the values and ideas of the world have already been turned upside-down. Where the one who is truly great, God the Son with all authority was nailed to a cross to serve his undeserving enemies.

And so are you living the cross-shaped life? Is your view of service and relationship with other believers marked by a self-forgetful unity, or a destructive competitiveness? Can you celebrate the service and even success of others because ultimately what matters to you is the glory of Christ?

The self-absorbed life is always comparing yourself with others and treating them with a level of scepticism or jealousy. The self-forgetful life wants others to flourish in service for the glory of God.

Many of you will know Dane Ortlund's book *Gentle and Lowly*. It's received massive praise and recognition around the world and rightly so, it's a great book.

But you may not know that there are several others in the Ortlund family who just to also be church pastor's and authors. And his book on humility Dane's brother Gavin writes of how people have bought his books and visited his church thinking he was the acclaimed author of *Gentle and Lowly*.

And Gavin writes that he's so thankful that envy of his brother's success hasn't really been a problem, but to avoid any temptation he has made it his practice that every time had that encounter or even hears about his brother's book, he takes time to pray and thank God for the influence of the book.

To thank God for his brother and that more will be sold and it will benefit more believers and ultimately glorify Christ. And he says he does this because all of us need the "wonders of the gospel to seep down into every nook and cranny of our soul. You must let his love, his joy, and his goodness flow into you at the deepest level possible, meeting the needs and desires that cause us to struggle with envy." (Gavin Ortlund, *Humility*)

A deeper, more profound, more comforting grasp of the Gospel will allow us to be the servant of all, to be self-forgetful in our unity with others. Because I think deep down we know what will hold us back from actually doing this.

From putting ourselves last and being the servant of all. It will be hard or costly, yes we'll have to put ourselves out there and not be passive which is scary, but more than that, we might worry that we'll go unnoticed, our needs won't be met as we look to the needs of others.

Can we really be sure that we won't be forgotten or overlooked? Well only if we are persuaded that God has met our needs in Jesus and will continue to provide for us as we give ourselves to his work. As Gavin Ortlund said, having the Gospel infiltrate our lives at the deepest level.

Which is exactly what we heard in our second reading from Philippians. As Paul implores the church to unity and other-person centredness he grounds them in cross. <sup>4</sup> *Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.* <sup>5</sup> *Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus.*

And we heard didn't we as he spells out the breathtaking majesty of how Christ first served us: that the one in very nature God emptied himself and became a servant (v.6), humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross (v.8).

That is true greatness, greatness that has liberated us from the power and penalty of sin, and will liberate us from the self-absorbed life that is destructive to us and to others as we keep coming back to the cross to shape our priorities, our desires, and ultimately and service of others.

Let's keep looking to the cross to give us the joy of self-forgetfulness and enable us to the servant of all. Let's pray.