**THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

***Mark 9:30-50***

***“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.” (v. 37)***

In the previous passage, we learned Jesus’ amazing promise, *“Everything is possible for one who believes.”* It’s so encouraging for all of us to hold on to these words by faith and challenge our practical problems in our prayers. Today, Jesus teaches another eye-opening lesson. It is the way to live a truly great life. I believe that everybody wants to be great because we human beings were created in the image of God, who is the great God (Ezr 5:8). But the problem is that our concept of greatness has been terribly damaged and perverted since mankind’s fall. Jesus came to this world to show us what true greatness looks like, a greatness that we are all called to pursue. May God open our hearts to embrace today’s teaching and live by the truth!

After healing a boy possessed by a deaf and mute spirit, Jesus and his disciples left that place and passed through Galilee. For almost three years, Jesus had served his Galilean ministry. Now he was resolutely heading toward Jerusalem and concentrated on teaching his disciples (31a). On the way, Jesus predicted for the second time what would happen to him in Jerusalem, ***“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”*** Compared to his first prediction in 8:31, Jesus added that he would be delivered into the hands of men. Here “be delivered” means to “be betrayed” or “abandoned.” He foretold very distressing news that he would be betrayed by one of his disciples and forsaken by his beloved ones. Betrayal by a dearly loved one is the most difficult pain a person can experience.

Jesus must have been brokenhearted already. But the disciples did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it (32). They only feared that their dream of an earthly messianic kingdom might be shattered. As they walked along the road, they tried to avoid Jesus and talked among themselves. Inevitably the disciples’ hidden power struggle surfaced, as they expected that Jesus would soon establish an earthly messianic kingdom and give chief positions to each of his disciples. Expecting the highest position, each one began to brag about himself and it escalated into an argument about who was the greatest among them. Peter must have eagerly spoke up with his big mouth, “Man’s greatness lies in his zeal and passion. I’m ready to give my life for the Lord.” Philip must have responded. “No, true greatness comes from man’s brain, not his mouth. Are you smarter than me?” They were like little children quarrelling and fighting to take bigger toys, in front of their dad, who would soon go through a great trial.

They came to Capernaum. When Jesus was in the house, he asked them, ***“What were you arguing about on the road?” (33)*** The disciples suddenly became very quiet, realizing that their argument was laid bare. They expected that Jesus would rebuke them. However, Jesus did not condemn their desire to be great, but began to teach them about true greatness in his kingdom. He taught each of his disciples to deliberately choose a specific pattern of life to be truly great in God’s sight.

*First, Jesus teaches true humility and servantship (vs. 35-37).* Read verse 35. ***“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’”*** Jesus clearly says that we must take the lowest position and be servants of all. To our fallen human mindset, this is a groundbreaking teaching. In this fallen world, people try to find their greatness based on their social position, power, possessions, human recognition, or achievements. So they compete and work hard to be first. We may unconsciously try to apply this concept to even our own spiritual life like the disciples. So if we feel that we are not treated well or recognized as first, we lose meaning in our lives, get depressed and harbor grudges or bitterness. We may enjoy recognition before people, but don’t like to serve others and the church apart from people’s attention. But Jesus’ teaching of true greatness turns our value system upside down. Jesus teaches us to “take the lowest position and be the servants of all.” This is the true greatness in God’s sight.

The Bible constantly and repeatedly teaches God’s way of dealing with the proud and humble. 1 Peter 5:5b says, *“All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’”* It has always been man’s pride that breaks the right relationship between God and people. We know the seriousness of pride and God’s delight in the humble mindset. But how can we be humble and serve others? In their book, entitled, “The Gospel-Centered Life,” co-authors Robert H. Thune and Will Walker use something called “the gospel grid” to explain that true humility comes from knowing oneself before God as a helpless sinner and knowing God’s holiness. The more we are aware of our own sinfulness and of God’s holiness, the more we are humbled and our appreciation and love for Jesus grows. As a result, our love and service for others grow as well.

Yet, Jesus’ disciples apparently did not grasp Jesus’ teaching right away. So Jesus explained further through a demonstration by taking a child in his arms and saying 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” (37).*** Here we need to understand the significance of Jesus’ act in the context of those times. In America today, children have many rights. It is almost illegal for parents to spank their children, and some children have even sued their parents. But in Jesus’ day children were marginalized. Children, along with women, were not included in number counts. The social status of children was similar to that of a servant. Furthermore, little children are incredibly demanding due to their helplessness, so they need unceasing care and attention. They seem insignificant and unprofitable, without any guaranteed reward.

But Jesus says, ***“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name…”*** Jesus teaches us to welcome and serve a little child in his name. Here ***“in my name”*** means with his same mind and heart and on his behalf. Jesus is in very nature God, but he gave up his heavenly glory and richness and took the form of a man. He emptied himself and made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. He became a servant of us who were spiritually like little children. We were helpless, self-centered, and useless to God, but Jesus so loved us and valued us. The infinite God came to this world to look for one lost soul, even one so small and insignificant like me, and served until he laid down his life for me. As I meditate on Jesus’ love, I cannot but confess like King David, *“Who am I, Sovereign Lord…that you have brought me this far?” (2 Sa 7:18)*

Jesus wants us to remember his love for each of us, take the lowest position and serve one little child among us in his love. Jesus then promises, ***“…and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”*** When we welcome a little child in his name, we are actually welcoming Christ himself; more than that, we are welcoming our heavenly Father who sent him. This is the amazing spiritual reality. We have great opportunity to serve our Lord Jesus and our heavenly Father by serving little children. Furthermore, in verse 41, Jesus teaches that he sees and rewards seemingly insignificant acts of service like giving a cup of water in his name. An encouraging word, a smile, a prayer, and perhaps even patting a disheartened shoulder in Jesus’ love are all counted.

Apostle Paul deeply recognized who he was and who God is. In 1 Timothy 1:15, he confesses, *“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”* Regardless of his zeal, sacrifice, and hard work for God, he never lost his awareness of himself as the worst sinner and was full of thanksgiving and grace. When he was in prison in Rome, he met Onesimus, a slave, who ran away from Philemon, one of the prominent members in the Colossian church. At the time, a slave was considered as property. Escaped slaves deserved to be put to death without any legal process. But Paul welcomed Onesimus, served him in Christ’s love and accepted him as his own son (Phm 10). Through Paul’s love, Onesimus was changed and became a useful servant of God. So Paul humbly pleaded with Philemon to accept Onesimus back not as a slave, but as a dear brother in Christ.

To Paul, Onesimus was one of the little children. Onesimus could have been easily neglected, abandoned, and lost. But Paul saw Jesus in such an undeserving slave’s face and served him. Who is your Onesimus? Where is one little child whom you need to serve? He or she desperately needs our care, comfort, prayers and love. But he or she can easily go unnoticed by our haughty eyes since they seem so insignificant, unprofitable and lowly. Only with Jesus’ heart and Jesus’ eyes we can find and serve them. Jesus values a little child, so he values his servant who welcomes the little child with his mindset. True greatness in God’s sight lies in our inner growth in true humility and servantship as manifested in serving a little child.

*Second, Jesus teaches a God-centered (Christ-centered) mindset (vs. 38-41).* While listening to Jesus’ teaching, John says in verse 38, ***“Teacher…we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”*** This man who drove out demons in Jesus’ name apparently believed in Jesus, depended on Jesus’ power and worked for Jesus’ glory. Maybe John was sensitive, however, because some disciples had recently failed to drive out a demon while this man seemed very successful. John should have been happy to see others driving out demons in Jesus’ name. From the perspective of God’s kingdom, it was a victory over Satan’s work. Jesus taught us to pray, *“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:9b-10).* Jesus teaches us our foremost prayer topic: It is for God’s honor and his kingdom. If God is honored and his kingdom advanced in every area of our lives, we should be happy. That should be the deep desire and mindset of God’s children.

But John was not God-centered. His narrow mindset rooted in self-righteousness and self-centeredness hindered the advance of God’s kingdom.. What did Jesus say? ***“Do not stop him…For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us” (39).*** Jesus did not stop those who were working in his name. In the kingdom of God, Jesus is King and Lord. Anyone who confesses Jesus as King and works in his name should be respected and accepted on the basis of Jesus’ name. This is a Christ-centered mindset. We tend to categorize people into groups. But we should get rid of excessive group identities among Christian workers and work together for Christ’s name and his kingdom.

Jesus did not come to this world to make groups, but destroy barriers. Ephesians 2:14 says, *“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”* Jesus embraces all kinds of sinners in his bosom. True greatness in God’s sight lies in one’s Christ-centered mindset, overcoming self-centeredness, embracing others and rejoicing when Christ is glorified in any circumstance (Php 1:15-18).

*Third, Jesus teaches to strive for holiness (vs. 42-48).* Thus far Jesus has taught how one can be truly great in his kingdom. It is by growing in humility and servantship and having a Christ-centered mindset. Now Jesus teaches that those who pursue greatness should be very considerate of the eternal consequences of sin. Read verse 42. ***“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.”*** This tells us how much Jesus values each of his little ones. Just as he is aware of every act of kindness done to each of them, he is also aware of every stumbling block that comes upon each of them. Young believers are vulnerable to temptation and easily wounded. They should be protected in a proper environment so they can grow strong enough to stand by themselves. We must be very sensitive of our influence over them, lest we cause immature believers to stumble due to our poor example.

C.S. Lewis, in his book entitled, “The Problem of Pain” says that perhaps four-fifths of the sufferings of mankind is accounted by man’s own sins. If we don’t think seriously about the consequences of our sins, we naturally become wounding machines to others. Jesus warned about the seriousness of causing others to stumble by pointing to the method of execution for the most horrible criminals in ancient times, being drowned in the sea with a large millstone hung on one’s neck.

Jesus also teaches that we need to carefully think about the consequence of sins for our own lives. Read verse 43. ***“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.”*** He explains that the result of our sin is fatal, a matter of eternal life and death. Jesus emphasizes that we must think about eternity very seriously. He directs us to pursue the kingdom of God at any cost in this world. The kingdom of God perfectly and eternally rewards us for all our devotion, sacrifice, and spiritual struggle. At the same time, hell is a place to avoid by any means necessary. Many people take hell lightly. But Jesus clearly explains what hell is like. Those in hell are eaten by worms that do not die and burned by fire that is never quenched (48). There is a great chasm between heaven and hell that no one can cross (Lk 16:26). There is the complete and eternal separation of those in hell, which causes unbearable loneliness (C.S. Lewis, the Great Divorce). So Jesus instructs us to perform “spiritual surgery” on ourselves, removing anything that causes others to stumble or causes ourselves to be led astray (vs. 43-47). Our sinful habits, tendencies, or motives to sin must be dealt with resolutely.

True greatness thus lies in one’s personal pursuit of holiness while considering the eternal consequence of sins. We tend to be generous toward ourselves, but very strict toward others. However, we need to examine ourselves, guard our hearts first and strive to build up others through our own good examples.

Jesus showed us the perfect example for our spiritual struggle. Hebrews 5:8-9 say, *“Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him…”* Through his obedience to the Father’s will amid his cries and tears, and by laying down his life for us on the cross, Jesus became the Stepping Stone for all believers to access our heavenly Father. But to those who reject Jesus, he is the stumbling block. Based on each one’s relationship with Jesus, our lives will go through a different process and different destination. So Jesus says in verse 49, ***“Everyone will be salted with fire.”*** To those who believe in Jesus, God refines them like pure gold through his purifying work. But for those who do not believe, they will be eternally salted with judgment.

Now Jesus concludes his lesson in verse 50, ***“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”*** Salt is used as a flavoring and preserving agent for food in our daily lives. Spiritually, a disciple of Jesus and a non-disciple can be distinguished by their “saltiness”, which is a good influence on others and society. Jesus teaches his disciples to have salt among themselves. To have salt is to treasure Jesus most, to follow him and to learn from him at any cost. As we continually put Christ at the center of our lives and learn his mindset, we can maintain our saltiness. We all were like helpless children and like tasteless and salt-less people due to our sins. But Jesus humbled himself and became the servant of all. He broke the barrier and reconciled us with God and with each other. He became the Stepping Stone by laying down his life for us. Now Jesus wants each of us to grow in his image in true greatness before God. When Christ is at the center and reigns in our fellowship, conflict and strife are resolved and a loving and peaceful community can be established. It is most essential for each person to strive to learn the mind of Christ. Then the community can be a good and healthy environment for little children and young believers to be healed and grow.

Praise God for sending us our Lord Jesus Christ as our perfect example. Thank you Lord for your true greatness that we can follow and imitate. May God bless us to continually grow in Jesus’ image and deeply impact our society for his glory!