

The Gospel of Mark – Serious Serving

Mark 9:30-50

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



As we turn our eyes back to the Gospel of Mark, we are going to hear Jesus' words about serving and how important it is. In fact, one of the larger themes of Mark is that Jesus is the legitimate Messiah, and he is the servant Messiah. This is something that keeps catching the disciples off-guard and leaves them confused. In this section, Jesus will again tell them that he is going to die and come back from the grave. Now, they have heard him say this before. Here, they are just as confused as they had ever been, but now they keep their confusion to themselves. This whole dying business is not how Messiahs are supposed to operate. They are to rule and reign supreme. But Jesus is the servant Messiah who will give his life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45). The greatest act of ruling and reigning is to come at the resurrection when Jesus reigns supreme over the grave. The disciples will come to understand that... eventually. When they do, they won't be able to stop talking about it.

For now, though, Jesus is going to engage them once again about the greatness of serving and how to serve seriously. They arrive back at Capernaum (Jesus' ministry base), and on the way, they have a conversation about being great and who would be the greatest among themselves. Jesus turns their whole world upside down and tells them that to be great (first), they must be the last and a servant of all. This is not how their world was oriented. It is not how our world is oriented. The logic of our age and theirs was to be great is to be above serving. Jesus, as the Messiah, is the greatest of all, and he served first. To serve is to truly value someone not just for what they can do, but for who they are. This is the core of the gospel. That God who is esteemed above all things and people, esteemed you and me in our lowly estate and made a way for us to be restored to a place of honor through his son, Jesus... the servant Messiah. Our greatest hope is not by our own effort, but is by the fact that the God of the universe was willing to serve first. This is a truth that Jesus is teaching the disciples and is teaching us.

Jesus then continues the discussion about sin and leaders taking sin seriously. Why? Because leading someone away from life is the very opposite of serving. See, to serve well means to help someone experience their greatest good. And sin is the opposite of goodness, it death and destruction. Jesus' words are clear to serve well includes being concerned for the physical well-being of others, but it also includes being concerned for the spiritual well-being of others. And to dismiss or to downplay sin is to not serve others well. The disciples are slowly getting the reality that **admiring Jesus and following Jesus are not the same things**. Abundant life comes through following Jesus.

1. Confusion (vv. 30- 32)

a. They are still trying to figure out all that Jesus is teaching and precisely who he is.

- i. N.T. Wright expresses it this way, “I don’t know whether Mark wants us to feel sorry for the **disciples** at this point, but quite frankly I do. Earlier in the **gospel** Jesus said things to them in code, and they didn’t get it. The **parables** were secret, hidden messages which they gradually learnt—away from the crowds, in the house—how to understand. When Jesus warned them about the leaven of the **Pharisees** and Herod (8:15) they thought he was making a comment about them forgetting to bring bread. They have struggled to get their minds round the fact that he often says things that have a clear meaning at the surface level, but what he wants is for them to look under the surface and find a hidden meaning somewhere else. **And now he tells them something which we, the readers, realize he means quite literally; and they, not surprisingly, are puzzled because they are looking for a hidden meaning and can’t find it.**”¹
- ii. What did the disciples fail to understand? Jesus’ own self-chosen title ‘Son of man’ was by now familiar to them; ‘betrayal’ and ‘death’ were hard to accept, perhaps, but easy to understand as concepts. It must have been his reference to a resurrection *after three days* that baffled them, as apparently it had baffled them in verse 10 above.²

b. This confusion continues into the conversation on greatness and serving.

- i. This is often what we call the subversive values of Jesus. These are values that seem upside down to our natural instincts or thoughts. This is part of the larger theme in Mark, Jesus is the legitimate Messiah, but he is not what we expected.
- ii. Jesus’ preferred title, which is used again in this section, is Son of Man. This is a title that is used around 70 times in all four Gospel accounts. And in Mark, it occurs, 14 times. It is used to make clear Jesus’ Messianic and divine claims. He is not like any other “messiah” or prophet that has come before. His miracles point to him being God and his teaching makes it abundantly clear.
 1. In other words, Jesus isn’t being cute or coy about being God and the Messiah. He is abundantly clear.
- iii. **Mark highlights Jesus as the suffering and rejected Son of Man.** With nine such passages, Mark has three times the number of suffering sayings as he does of the other two categories of sayings. Mark opens his use of the title by pointing to Jesus’ *authority to forgive sin and his authority over the Sabbath (Mk 2:10, 28). However, the bulk of his references in the core of his Gospel involve the prediction of the Son of Man’s suffering (Mk 8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:21 [2x], 41). Mark concludes his references with a stress on the Son of Man as judge, and appealing directly to Daniel 7:13–14 and Psalm 110:1 reminds readers that the authority of his ministry will extend to the end. **This wrapping of authority around suffering tells the core story of Jesus as Son of Man, from suffering to vindication.**³
 1. **Again, they were expecting the Messiah, they just weren’t expecting the Messiah to be a suffering servant.**

¹ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 122.

² R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 223.

³ D. L. Bock, “Son of Man,” ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; IVP, 2013), 899.

2. Here, it can be really easy for us to read back into the text and to make connections because we know the end of the story. They were in the middle of it. We have the gift of hindsight.
 3. We also need to be careful in our pride that we think we see Jesus clearly all the time. We are just like the disciples in that the pressures, hopes, and needs of our lives can cloud our sight and cause us to confuse Jesus or mis him altogether.
- c. **Two questions for us to ask.**
- i. **How have I misunderstood the character and values of Jesus?**
 1. **Them:** They thought Jesus was going to institute a political kingdom. And could not wrap their minds around the idea of him dying and resurrecting.
 2. **Us:** Moral / Religious / Political / Philosophical
 - a. **Moral** – We can think that Jesus is only interested in our moral action. This is confused both in conservative and progressive approaches.
 - b. **Religious** – We can think that Jesus is only honored or followed via my very specific theological preferences. Yes, there are core doctrines that need to be held and there this much that is open for conversation and discussion.
 - c. **Political** – Yes, the gospel is a political statement, but it proclaims one King and his kingdom above all else. If we think that one political party or leader is “God’s candidate” I would propose that we have misunderstood Jesus.
 - d. **Philosophical** – We can confuse Jesus in the realm of philosophy when we think that he is just like any other teacher or philosopher.
 - ii. **How do I misunderstand the character and values of Jesus?**
 1. The risk we run is not just to confuse and misunderstand Jesus before we follow him, it is that we are still susceptible to misunderstand while we are following him. We do this when we conflate two incompatible belief systems. And we need to be careful to not dismiss the fruitful tension that Scripture leads us into.
 2. **We need to routinely ask the Holy Spirit help us stay faithful to all that Jesus is and nothing more or less. It is the role of the Spirit to call back to and to clarify who Jesus is. (Jn. 14:26)**
 - a. **Karl Barth once said it this way, “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”**

2. To be great is to serve. (vv. 33-37)

- a. **The subversive values of Jesus** → Greatness is found in serving not being served.
 - i. This will be a continued conversation for the disciples. In the next chapter, Jesus will compare the value of serving to the reality of the Gentile world which lords power over one another. The disciples and Christians are to have a distinctly different approach. That isn’t a lack of authority, but it is a genuineness and compassionate approach. We’ve all experienced power for power sake, and it is soul crushing and demoralizing.
 - ii. **V. 35** - In that case, the deeper principle will be that, if we desire spiritual greatness, then what we truly desire is the task of service to others, and so we must deliberately choose the lowliest and most humble place. **This was the whole key to the life of Jesus,**

for he came, not to be served, but to be a servant (10:45). Humility, however, is not a 'natural' virtue, and few qualities are more unpopular in our self-assertive world.⁴

- iii. To try to jolt them out of their upside-down thinking, Jesus, not for the last time, uses a child as a teaching aid. Aside from normal family affection children were not rated highly in the ancient world; they had no status or prestige.⁵

b. Rewind to chapter 1 → The servant Messiah (Jesus) and the servant proclaimer (John).

- i. Mark started out his Gospel account by telling us that what we are about to read is the good news (gospel) about Jesus Christ.
- ii. **What does the word "gospel" mean? → Good news – to be proclaimed and to be heard.**
 - 1. This is a fairly unique word to us today that is limited to Christian circles. In Mark's day, and especially in the context of the city of Rome, it would have been a very common idea.
 - 2. **The term "gospel" or "evangel" was not a word first coined among the Christians.** On the contrary, the concept was significant both in pagan and Jewish culture. Among the Romans it meant "joyful tidings" and was associated with the cult of the emperor, whose birthday, attainment to majority and accession to power were celebrated as festival occasions for the whole world.⁶
- iii. εὐαγγέλιον (euangelion). n. neut. **good news, message of God's salvation. In the NT, refers specifically to the good news about Jesus.** This is easily the most common word in the NT for the saving message about Jesus. The Gospels identify the *euangelion* with Jesus' message about the coming kingdom of God (e.g., Matt 4:23; Mark 1:14–15). This message carries resonances of Isa 40–55—particularly Isa 52:7, which in the Septuagint uses the participle of the related verb εὐαγγελίζομαι (*euangelizomai*, "to proclaim good news"). These resonances imply that Jesus' life established the loving rule of Israel's God on earth as it is in heaven, and thus is the great return of Israel back from exile. The word *euangelion* itself is not used in the Septuagint to translate Hebrew בְּשׂוֹרָה (*běšōrâ*, "good news"), but the related feminine noun εὐαγγελία (*euangelia*, "good news") is.⁷

c. Back to the subversive values of Jesus → Serve to be great.

- i. This is a rebuke to much of our "leadership" culture.
 - 1. How? Well, Mark has already established for us who Jesus is, and he is not the lowly and impotent. Instead, he is the sovereign and all-powerful God of the universe. However, in his incarnation, he comes to us as a gentle and lowly servant. In fact, Jesus says this about himself, "I am gentle and lowly in heart..." (Matt. 11:29)
 - 2. Jesus who could have come rightfully demanding to be served, serves humanity. This is an upside down approach to how we are told to
- ii. **Application question – What is my posture towards serving?**
 - 1. If Jesus as the servant messiah models the greatness of serving, do I see it the same way?

⁴ R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 224–225.

⁵ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 124.

⁶ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 42.

⁷ Chris Kugler, "Gospel," ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

2. The challenge here for so many of us as Americans, is that we are immersed in a culture that says, there is nothing more important than the individual. That flies in the face of what Jesus models for us. The one who is the most important of all, humbled himself and served. To serve is to elevate the one you are serving and thus to diminish the self.
 - a. We know the importance of this truth as we apply it in our normal lives. Parents serving kids. Spouses serving each other. Friends serving one another. The difference is that Jesus invites us not just to an occasional serving or a serving when we feel like it. But instead, as an operating principle of our lives.
 - b. **Caution** – Some will hear this call to serving as a disregard for boundaries. That is not it at all. We are not the savior and so we are not infinite. You have heard me say before, purposeful responsiveness is not meeting every possible need. Purposeful responsiveness is living within my God-given calling as an ambassador of reconciliation, considering how I might use my resources (time, talents, and treasure) for the glory of God and the good of others, and trusting the Holy Spirit to guide, prompt, and exhort towards righteous action.
 - c. **What Jesus models for us with the greatness of serving, is a perspective that is to inform our response, interactions, and even the way we define a meaningful life.** → We see a clear example of this in the person of John the Baptist.
- d. **Application question – Do I know my gifting to be used as a servant?** (cf. Rom. 12:3-8)
 - i. **⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.**
 - ii. Paul will give the church in Rome a list of gifts that God gives believers for the strengthening and encouragement of the body. That is specifically, that we are to use as servants.
 1. Prophecy – Proclaiming the Word of God
 2. Acts of service – Seeing and meeting needs.
 3. Teaching – Helping to explain or clarify difficult concepts.
 4. Giving (generosity) – Energized by giving of money.
 5. Exhortation – Encouragement towards righteousness.
 6. Leadership
 7. Acts of mercy – Particularly in empathy (feeling what others feel)
 - iii. When you look at this list, which one jumps out to you as something you are passionate about, naturally inclined towards, or others have affirmed in you?
 - iv. If you look at the list and wonder about your gifting, one of the best ways to identify that is to ask a mature believer in your life (who knows you), which one they see in you.
 1. We must remember, Paul tells the church in Rome that these gifts are part of a life that is a living sacrifice which is a spiritual act of worship. This is the same thing we see in the example of John the Baptist.

2. We must also remember, Paul teaches that the gifts are not superior to one another, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function...”
- v. **Again, let us ask, do I know my gifting, and am I convinced of the greatness of serving that Jesus, the servant Messiah, models for and offers me?**
 1. The thing that often gets in our way of serving is pride. (vv. 38-41)
 - a. This is an interesting sub-conversation in the larger conversation on serving.
 - b. The disciples have narrow, prideful hearts that seem bent on cornering the market on ministry—but Jesus’ heart is more expansive. It is as if Jesus is saying, *Would that all the Lord’s people were exorcists who would cast out demons in my name!*⁸
 - c. Here’s the second reason for the command: “For the one who is not against us is for us” (**v 40**). Notice that Jesus redefines “us” beyond the scope of the disciples. In their preoccupation with themselves, they draw the circle of insiders around themselves only. Jesus draws the circle much wider: *if they are not against us, then they are for us.*⁹

3. To serve is to take righteousness seriously. (vv. 42-50)

- a. **Context – A hard teaching from Jesus. → Sin has consequences.**
 - i. The Greek word translated “cause to sin” (*skandalizein*) means “to cause to stumble” or “to offend,” and in this instance refers to destroying the faith of a fellow believer or causing a believer to fall away from God. The punishment for such an offense is calamitous. “ ‘It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck,’ ” says Jesus. In the ancient world grain was ground by cylindrical-shaped millstones so large that they could be turned only by the power of beasts of burden. The inimitable imagery of being heaved into the sea with a millstone tied around one’s neck is typical of Jesus and argues in favor of the authenticity of the saying.¹⁰
- b. **What is sin? – The fundamental unbelief, distrust and rejection of God and human displacement of God as the center of reality.¹¹ This includes three different expressions:**
 - i. **Actions** – Sin is any evil action or evil motive that is in opposition to God. Simply stated, sin is failure to let God be God and placing something or someone in God’s rightful place of supremacy.¹²
 - ii. **Dominion** – Sin is a principle of captivity to a power that permeates and contaminates our human reality. *Sin* is the word Christians use to name not simply our failed acts but also our inner and outer captivity.”¹³

⁸ Jason Meyer, *Mark for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2022), 137.

⁹ Jason Meyer, *Mark for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2022), 138.

¹⁰ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 293.

¹¹ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 107.

¹² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 513.

¹³ Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life* (Waterbrook, 2020) 99.

- iii. **Deficiency** – The desire to overcome our limitations and finitude because of anxiety about our creaturely existence.¹⁴
 - 1. Each of these definitions gets at the full reality of sin.
 - a. Yes, it involves our wrong or broken actions, but it is more than that. Yes, it is a power that captivates our present reality, but it won't always. Yes, it is part of a dysfunctional identity where we believe that we can overcome our finite limitations.
- c. **To serve is to work for someone's greatest good.** And, as we've seen, our greatest good is only found in Jesus.
 - i. **Again, serving is about elevating others.** What do we elevate them to? Simply, we serve so that they would experience something good.
 - ii. **In other words, we do not serve to hurt someone.**
 - iii. The question of "greatest good" comes up again. Specifically, who or what can deliver our greatest good. And if we are to serve others, we should serve them in a way that helps them experience their greatest good. Jesus in this setting makes it clear, our greatest good is only found in him.
- d. **The subversive values of Jesus → Take righteousness seriously.**
 - i. The Scriptures are a long-form picture of a God who desires to redeem what was broken in the fall through sin.
 - 1. We don't like the conversation around sin or thinking that we are sinful. However, that actually causes great harm in the long run, both for us and for society.
 - 2. If we have nothing to be redeemed from, then we have nothing to be redeemed for.
 - ii. Philosopher Christopher Watkin helpfully explains, "**Put at its simplest: making more of sin is good for society. As a matter of fact, it is also good for democracy, good for equality, good for resisting tyranny and imperialism, and good for finding meaning in life. Sin itself is not good. We would, it is safe to say, be better off without it. An approach to society that does not shy away from the robust biblical doctrines of sin and judgment has much more of a fresh, truthful and, yes, positive vision to offer than one that fails to see what the Bible hides in plain sight.**"¹⁵
 - 1. In other words, "I need to be careful to not diminish what the Word of God has made plain and clear. And by doing so, I actually diminish the beauty of the life the Bible actually offers all of humanity."
- e. That is why Jesus is so serious about others seeing him clearly. To teach falsehoods about Jesus is to harm someone on an eternal scale.
 - i. In other words, our greatest good and righteousness cannot be separated. → **In what ways do I think that they can?**

¹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr via Scazzero, Peter. *The Emotionally Healthy Leader. How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World*, (2015), 185.

¹⁵ Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 110–111.