

Mark 9:33-50 "What really makes a person Great?"

Proposition: Great character brings with it great influence.

I don't know how often you think about the impact of your life.

When you have been promoted or raptured to heaven what real difference will your life and my life have made?

If I were to ask a person who doesn't know the Lord what greatness looks like, they might say, love or popularity or excellence in some sport or science or job.

For you and I who know the Lord, greatness looks a whole lot more like fulfilling God's purposes for your life and influencing as many people as possible for His kingdom.

Greatness. Deep in every one of our hearts is a desire, not for popularity or fame or wealth, but that we might live lives of significance, and make a real difference during our short stay in this world.

Greatness.

I recall working for my first bank manager in my late teens and hearing her say on many occasions as an excuse for her grumpiness and rudeness. "Well, I can't change, you just have to accept this is the way I am."

I have found that statement to be totally untrue.

When a person fills their mind with God's word their thinking does change, when you pray for change it does happen, when you allow God to teach you to respond differently through the seasons of life we do become better people.

Change is possible if you know what needs changing and you are willing to work with God to make those changes.

In just a minute I am going to share with you the 5 characteristics of a great person from Jesus' teaching, and I want you to know that you and I can all become great, people of Godly character that God can use to change this world, to really make a difference on this world. If we know what to aim for and are willing to journey with the Lord.

As we return to Mark 9 this morning I am amazed how much children feature in this chapter.

Last week Anne helped us see a scene where a young man was hurting himself, trying to take his own life again and again, having seizures etc because he was demon possessed. And she reminded us that if we just have a little faith, God can move into our situations and work miracles. As we come to our passage this morning, the disciples have been walking along together, just out of ear shot from Jesus and arguing. Who is the greatest disciple?

The Holy Spirit revealed to Jesus what they were arguing about and so Jesus takes a child, places them in the middle of the group and using the child as a model of the weak and the venerable begins to teach the disciples about what true greatness is, what characteristics in a person's life will position them to be used greatly by God and influence many for the Kingdom.

³³ Jesus and his disciples went to his home in Capernaum. After they were inside the house, Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about along the way?" ³⁴ They had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest, and so they did not answer.

³⁵ After Jesus sat down and told the twelve disciples to gather around him, he said, "If you want the place of honor, you must become a slave and serve others!"

³⁶ Then Jesus had a child stand near him. He put his arm around the child and said, ³⁷ "When you welcome even a child because of me, you welcome me. And when you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me."

In our text today, Jesus, our Master gives 5 keys to greatness and the first one is this

1. Treat all people equally

As a church we just love children! We value and want to invest into our youth and young adults. And so any passage that mentions children or youth in the bible captures our attention.

The purpose of this child here though is to illustrate to the disciples something countercultural. They have been assuming that greatness might have to do with favorites or who was most popular or who had done the greatest miracles.

Jesus here, says that greatness comes from character. And he puts a child in the middle of the room. While we profoundly love children and they are the primary focus of our evangelism. Children can't make you rich, can't give you a promotion. Can't be used as names to drop in social gatherings to impress others. Children, especially young children need from us more than they benefit us economically or socially.

Here is the point. If Jacinda Adern or a great sporting personality walked into our church or our homes today and a young child came to visit us tomorrow. Would Jacinda and little Johnny with the runny nose be treated with the same love and respect and warmth?

People with the sort of character that God can use, treat all people equally.

Would we show respect to Jacinda and make her comfortable and feel special.

Absolutely, and would we show that same interest and respect to a young child? I hope so.

Treating all people equally, seeing real value in everyone regardless of what they can give to us or do for us, is a fundamental characteristic of the sort of people that God can use to do great things.

Secondly.

A Characteristic, a key to becoming a great person that God can use is to be

2. Be big hearted, magnanimous towards other people

That means to be charitable, forgiving, generous, considerate, altruistic towards others.

³⁸ John said, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to force demons out of people. But he wasn't one of us, and we told him to stop."

³⁹ Jesus said to his disciples:

Don't stop him! No one who works miracles in my name will soon turn and say something bad about me. ⁴⁰ Anyone who isn't against us is for us. ⁴¹ And anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name, just because you belong to me, will surely be rewarded.

"hey, they said, we saw a guy casting out demons in Your name and He doesn't even go to our church. We told him to cut it out. He's not with us."

Then Jesus says "do not stop him."

"Anyone who isn't against us is for us."

Even if someone gives you, a Christian a cup of water, receive it because God will reward that person.

Yeh na, they don't speak in tongues, they baptize babies, their church services are so dead, they are in a different denomination, we disagree with their theology...

Be kind and accepting as people as possible, even if they don't agree with you on many things.

Let them do it, they will be blessed, in fact even if they give you a cup of water in my name they will be blessed.

They are doing good, get over yourself and let them go for it.

A second characteristic of a person that God can use for great things is that they are generous towards other people.

Thirdly, people with great character that God can use for great things

3. Handle others with sensitivity

Still with this child as His model in the middle of the room Jesus says

42 It will be terrible for people who cause even one of my little followers to sin. Those people would be better off thrown into the ocean with a heavy stone tied around their necks.

People with Godly character that God can use for great things do not do or say things that might cause a younger, weaker believer to stumble.

Handle others with sensitivity.

There was a great debate in the early church about whether or not Christians could buy meat from the markets knowing that it had been previously offered to idols. Paul said, those of you that are mature know that it can't hurt us but don't offer your guests some of this meat if you know they are young in the faith. They may not get it. Better to just not do it. It might hurt the little guys.

Paul said that all things were lawful to him but that he would not use his liberty in God in a way that might cause a young believer to stumble.

Let me give you some examples of this principle.

You might know that its OK to have a little wine or a moderate amount of alcohol to drink but .. if you have a guest or has had a problem with alcohol, don't do it.

You might want to discuss a problem you have with your mentor on the phone but don't let your children hear you criticize or speak negatively of another believer, it will damage their faith.

In the bad old days of Baptist Church meetings in the 60's through the 80's Baptist churches often had 'robust debates'. We were proud of them. And yet those 'robust debates' often turned new believers away from the church and caused them to become disillusioned about Christian claims to humility, love and respect.

Sometimes a dating couple will say we are OK spending time together alone behind closed doors.

We won't let hands go to places that togs cover. We are all good. You might be. But if a young Christian knows that you are spending time alone together behind closed doors, it can cause huge problems for their faith and their own choices around morality.

Handle others with sensitivity but

4. Deal with yourself Radically

43-44 So if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! You would be better off to go into life crippled than to have two hands and be thrown into the fires of hell that never go out. [a] 45-46 If your foot causes you to sin, chop it off. You would be better off to go into life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. [b] 47 If your eye causes you to sin, get rid of it. You would be better off to go into God's kingdom with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell. 48 The worms there never die, and the fire never stops burning.

Treat others equally, with generosity, with sensitivity but

Deal with yourself radically. That is what Godly character looks like that God can use to achieve great things.

Hey if something is causing you to sin, some friendship, some website, some association, some place is tempting you to sin and drawing you away from God, cut it off.

Deal with it radically.

If your hand causes you to sin, chop it off, if your foot takes you to places you shouldn't go, chop them off, if your eye is drawn to things you shouldn't be looking out, pluck out those points of temptation. Deal with yourself radically.

If something is slowing you down in your walk with the Lord, don't let it insidiously, subtly grow in your life, deal with it at the point of inception, as soon as you think of it, cut it off, pluck it out.

I remember a long season of my life when I was very, very poor. And I had this habit of buying a 'trade a boat' magazine. Or when out for a drive, if I saw a boat sales yard, I had to call in. I would dream of buying a boat weekly and spend time circling pictures and researching trade a boat, until,

one-day God said to me, you are not content, you are becoming greedy. Cut it out. Chop it off and from that day I stopped doing the things that fed that greed.

I have known friends of mine with porn addictions who gave up having a smart phone at huge inconvenience to themselves and their businesses.

I have known people who struggle with gossip who have given up multimedia and even friendships where that happened all too easily.

I have known people with substance addictions who will drive the long way home rather than go past the shop or the place where they would buy their drink or tinny.

With other people be kind and generous and sensitive but when you see Satan tempting you in an area of your own life. Deal with it radically, decisively.

You are better off without that friendship, that device, that social network, that website, that type of book than to allow sin to get a hold of your life, slow you down and draw you away from God.

The final characteristic that Jesus says Great people have in their character and so God can use them for great things is...

5. Be a peacemaker

That is try to maintain amicable relationships with everyone. Live at peace with others.

⁴⁹ Everyone must be salted with fire.^[c]

⁵⁰ Salt is good. But if it no longer tastes like salt, how can it be made salty again? Have salt among you and live at peace with each other.

In the middle east in ancient times, when people made an agreement between them they would often put salt on some bread. It was called 'salting the bread' and part of the contract process. It was a sign of peace, a sign of agreement.

Salt throughout scripture is that God quality in us that is deep and real and comes from a relationship with Jesus. And so we can be salt in the world by letting the character of God come into our lives and then flow out of our lives.

The strange phrase 'salted with fire' here may well refer back to imagery from the Old Testament. All sacrifices had to be salted before being burnt and offered up to God. In Leviticus chapter 2 it says salt the sacrifice but don't put honey on it. Why would that matter.

The thing is when honey is put under pressure and heated up it no longer remains sweet. But when salt is heated up on the sacrifice it retains its flavor and saltiness.

The point being, that if we just try to talk nicely, and be sweet to others that is all good while there is no pressure and no tiredness and no suffering and sacrifice going on, but trying to be nice is not going to work in relationships when there is suffering and pain and sacrifice. Trying hard to be sweet just doesn't hold up under the heat. But saltiness does.

You see if we are well connected with the Lord and drawing from the Lord. God changes our inner being, who we really are, and when the pressure comes on and the sleepless nights mount up, our words and our behavior will still build relationships and maintain relationships, because saltiness is deep and comes from the Lord.

Life is short. We get a brief time in the span of eternity to really make a difference.

And what will cause you to be the sort of person that God can use to influence many is great character.

Anyone and everyone can change if they want change and they are allowing God to change them in the very core of who they are!

I think that there is a high probability that I might experience the rapture, but if I get promoted home and you put on a funeral for me, I want the sort of funeral that Jocelyn Badger had. A funeral where people don't rave about my singing ability or my great dancing or my sporting prowess. A funeral where people rave about how God was able to work through me to influence many for His kingdom. That's being great.

You and I want to live lives of significance and to do that to be truly great we need Godly character; The sort of character that will cause us to treat all people equally.

The sort of character that will cause us to be big hearted towards others.

The sort of character that will cause us to handle others with sensitivity and deal with ourselves radically.

The sort of Godliness, so that even when we are under extreme pressure and the heat of life, we will live with others peacefully, and His God character will flow out of us like salt to the world around us.

You have only one life to live and one life to give.

May He increasingly create in you the character Jesus described in this passage so that you can make a real difference in this world and achieve true greatness.