

MARK 9:30–37. (EHV)

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know this, because he was teaching his disciples. He told them, **“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise.”** But they did not understand the statement and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, **“What were you arguing about on the way?”** But they remained silent, because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, **“If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all.”** Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, **“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me.”**

Have you ever gotten involved in GOAT debates? For those of you unfamiliar with the term, GOAT is an acronym that stands for Greatest Of All Time. People like to debate: Who is the greatest basketball player of all time? Michael Jordan or LeBron James? Who is the greatest golfer of all time? Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods? Who is the greatest quarterback of all time? Joe Montana? Aaron Rodgers? Tom Brady? Then there are the more intellectual debates: Who is the greatest chess player of all time? The American Bobby Fischer, the Russian Garry Kasparov, or the Norwegian Magnus Carlsen? Who is the greatest U. S. president? The greatest general? The greatest Christian theologian? (I wondered if there might be a GOAT debate for ranchers, but when I Googled “GOAT rancher,” the first results were *Goat Rancher Magazine* and an Oklahoma State University article titled “So You Want to Be a Goat Rancher.”)

When you hear people engage in GOAT debates, you quickly find out what we associate with greatness, what we think it takes to be the best. And our standard is actually very similar to that of Jesus’s disciples.

Jesus had revealed his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration not long before this. Peter, James, and John had witnessed it. We heard last week about when they returned and Jesus healed the demon-possessed boy whom the other disciples couldn’t heal. Now Jesus and his disciples move on from there and pass through Galilee, and on the journey Jesus must have been walking separately from his disciples, but still close enough to be within earshot. When they arrived in Capernaum and entered the house where they would be staying, he asked his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the way?”

But no one answered, “because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” We don’t have the details of the argument, but it’s not hard for us to imagine how the argument started or what was discussed. It could have started with Peter, James, and John. The Gospels tell us that Peter, James, and John kept Jesus’s command not to tell anyone what they had seen up on the mountain after Jesus rose from the dead, but they still could have brought up how Jesus kept picking those three to go with him. Or it could have started with Peter, James, and John razzing the other disciples for not being able to cast out the demon from the boy and pointing out that they never had any problem casting out demons. Maybe someone

responded by pointing out to Peter that he may have cast out more demons than most of them, but Jesus had never said, “Get behind me, Satan!” to any of them. Maybe they started figuring out who had cast out the most demons, and then the others highlighted other experiences or other facts in order to make themselves look better. Which of them had performed the most miracles overall? Who had brought the most people to Jesus? Who was the most intelligent or the most gifted speaker? Which of them was the most popular after Jesus? If Jesus ended up reigning as king in Jerusalem, whom would he be most likely to choose as his right hand man? Each one of them wanted to be first; each one of them wanted to be the best.

And this all seems very foolish and infantile to us, especially for men who are journeying with Jesus in the flesh, the most humble man alive, the one who just said that he was going to be betrayed into the hands of men and would be killed and rise three days later.

But we know all that, we know the full story of Jesus’s humility, and he is our Lord and Master too, and are we any better? Pastor Windsperger likes to point out—and he’s not wrong—how sometimes, not always, but sometimes, conversations and presentations at pastors’ conferences degenerate into little more than ministry comparisons, with pastors subtly or not so subtly, wittingly or unwittingly, emphasizing how their preaching or administration or church programs are better. I’m guilty of this too. Every single conference paper I’ve prepared and presented has been one continuous struggle between wanting to make the Scripture clear to the brother pastors and wanting to impress the brother pastors.

How many of us make sports the top priority for our kids and grandkids because maybe, just maybe, they’ll go pro, or at least be a good college athlete. And why do we want that? Purely so that they can provide for their families without worry? Or so that they can be filthy rich? So that they can be famous? So that they can make us famous? So that they can be in GOAT debates? How often don’t we cheer right along with everyone else when the athlete from our favorite time scores and then beats his own chest or hold up his index finger—so that we’re essentially saying with everyone else, “Now that’s greatness”?

How often does doing or being better than our classmates or our neighbor drive our studies or our work ethic? Are the mounts and decorations in our homes for sharing beauty or showing off?

How often, when a person shares a story about something amazing he or she experienced or something humorous, isn’t our first reaction to try to think of a similar or better story, or something more humorous, so that we can draw attention away from that person to ourselves?

How often don’t we act as if we know more and would do better than those in charge, as if all the world’s problems would be solved if only there were eight billion of me instead of just one? How often do we criticize and ridicule more than we compliment?

With all of this, what are we saying being the best means? It means being looked up to. It means being the center of attention. It means being praised and respected. It means being served.

And there stands Jesus. He goes over, sits down, and calls us to himself. “If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all.” Notice how Jesus condescends to our way of thinking. He doesn’t just say, “Stop wanting to be first. Stop wanting to be the best. You need to be last.” No, he says, “Do you truly want to be first? Do you truly want to be the best? Okay, but here’s how.”

And what is the way truly to be first, truly to be the best? Jesus gives us two pictures. The first picture is of a line of people. Our natural desire is to push and shove our way to get to the front of the line, to be first in line. But Jesus says the right way to be first is to take ourselves out of whatever part of the line we're in and voluntarily go to the very back. If you still want to be happy in that scenario, what attitude do you have to have? Everyone else just got that much closer to being first, because of you! You have to adopt an attitude of finding your happiness in the happiness of others.

The second picture is that of a servant. A unique servant. A servant who answers to everybody and takes orders from everybody. Again, the attitude is one of finding joy in the happiness and fulfillment of others. Now this picture could get stretched. For example, Jesus is not saying that we take orders even when people tell us to sin, or that we look at people living in sin and say, "Oh well, as long as they're happy." The emphasis is on our willingness to be of godly service to someone, whoever that someone might be.

But how can we know if we're that type of person? "Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me.'"

Can you even begin to imagine this scene? This is Jesus. He has healed countless sick. He has driven out countless demons. He has taught in many synagogues. He has gone toe-to-toe with the leaders of the people. He has fed thousands. He has walked on water. He has calmed storms. He has revealed his blinding glory. He is a celebrity.

And here he is, wrapping his arms around a random child and urging his disciples to welcome children such as the little child he is embracing.

Which celebrities do you know who actually give serious attention to little children, even their own children? Children aren't going to get them any endorsements. Children aren't going to help them make money. Children aren't going to advance their careers. They don't have time for children. But Jesus does, and he urges us to welcome them too.

Friends, if the thought of bending down, or crouching down, or getting down on one knee or both knees and saying hello to a Christian child and asking them how they're doing or what they're doing is unthinkable to you, then realize that it is unthinkable to you to welcome Jesus or his heavenly Father.

So let's say it: Children, welcome to God's house. You are dear to Jesus and dear to us. Thank you for your joy in the simple things of life. Thank you for being spontaneous. Thank you for your obedience. Thank you for showing us by example what it means to take Jesus at his word and believe him.

This is what it means to be the best—being of service to others, being useful to others, helping others, whether we're rich or poor, popular or not, famous or not, talented or not, grown up or still a child. This should be the goal behind all of our pursuits. If you're young and you want to know what you should be when you grow up, here's your answer. Don't look first and foremost to what will make you happy and bring you fame and fortune. Look first and foremost to how you can be of service to others. When you pursue your own happiness, you never really find it. When you pursue the happiness and well-being of others, you find your own too.

This is what it means to be the best, because this is what the Best One did. That's what he had just announced to his disciples: "In order to be of use to you, I have to die. I have to be killed. So that is what I am going to do." Though he was in very nature God, having everything and needing nothing, he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant (Phil. 2:6–7). As the disciples remained silent before Jesus in their guilt, so Jesus would remain silent before Pilate as he bore our guilt. He paid for our pride with his humility. He always put himself at everyone else's disposal, and he continues to do so. He serves us. He serves us in his Word and in his sacraments, feeding our souls with the good news of his forgiveness and salvation. He serves us at God the Father's right hand, ruling for us, interceding for us, and preparing a place for us. He puts his angels at our service, protecting and guarding us in all our ways. And of course he always has time for little children.

Jesus is first because he was last. Jesus is the best because he has shared everything good that is his with us. Jesus is the greatest of all time because he served all people of all time in the greatest possible way.

Do we want to be first? Do we want to be best? Then let's turn away from our earthly idols and look up to the only One truly worthy of being looked up to—our Savior. That's what being the greatest, being the best, looks like. Amen.