

BaptistWay Bible Series for January 27: Me first

January 21, 2008

Posted: 1/21/07

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Me first

- Mark 9:30-37

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This Scripture passage is one of those you know must be verifiably accurate. Any text that would appear to make the disciples look discomfited rather than debonair must be absolutely authentic.

Some biblical scholars employ the “criterion of embarrassment” to determine the historical probability of certain texts in the Gospels or episodes in the life of Jesus. Texts and occasions that would present embarrassing material from Jesus or the disciples are sometimes said to be softened or suppressed by the Gospel writers. Anything that would weaken the writers’ arguments about the Jesus story or that might be held against them by opponents was of particular concern.

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But the synoptic Gospels (Mathew, Mark and Luke) are in agreement about this one, even though Matthew softens the scene some by extending the question at issue in the disciples' debate: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (Matthew 18:1).

Apparently Jesus overhears the mumbling disciples grumbling about who is the greatest. Seeing a teachable moment, he decides to ask the question anyway: What were you arguing about on the way? (v. 33). Ironically their arguments rooted in spiritual pride lead to a moment that was anything but their proudest. Their silence suggests so (v. 34).

The seriousness of what Jesus had just told the disciples draws even more attention to their petty opinions about who is the greatest. Jesus had just disclosed the harsh reality: The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again (v. 31). But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him (v. 32).

This was the second time Jesus had tried to tell them what was bound to happen in Jerusalem. Remember Peter's rebuke of Jesus the first time (8:33)? Despite Jesus' trying to tell them what was going to happen, the sacrifice and self-denial of Jesus' journey to the cross did not fit their narrow notions of greatness.

So how did the disciples measure greatness? Was it based on their ability to understand all Jesus was saying to them? Was it measured by their

loyalty to him personally? Were they considering a combination of factors like gifts, skills and age? Was it determined by how many healings and miracles they managed to perform? Did they talk about how many people they convinced to join the Jesus movement and if so, how did they tally those conversions? What sort of arguments did the disciples raise with one another?

In American culture, we often measure greatness based on individual achievements. Students with the highest SAT and GRE scores are admitted to the best schools. Professional sports often measure greatness by the number of home runs, the most touchdowns or the most points. The movie industry rewards greatness by awarding Oscars. The music industry rewards greatness by awarding Grammys. Standards of success are measured by who drives the most expensive car or the title they carry before or after their names—CEO, Rev., Ph.D or Esq.

We Baptists are notorious for measuring greatness relative to statistics and numbers. We measure quality based on quantity: What is your Sunday school attendance? How many members does your church have? What is the size of your youth group? How many people did you baptize last year? How big is your budget? How many satellite campuses do you have? So if we had to find ways to measure the impact of our ministries without referencing a number or statistic, what might we say? Might there be alternative ways to measure greatness?

Jesus provided some. Jesus did not evaluate the greatness of each disciple based on their criteria of greatness, whatever those criteria were. He turned the disciples' notions of greatness upside down and said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (v. 35). Then he turned attention away from them and took a child in his arms. Jesus gives them a living example of greatness that is measured by whether a child is welcomed in his name.

We must not miss the significance of his example. In the first-century world, all children were at risk. Little social value was given to children, because by some estimates, the infant mortality rate was 30 percent. Another 30 percent were dead by 6 years old and 60 percent were dead by 16 years old. Children had no status, no value and certainly no bragging rights in society. They were not accepted as the pride and joy of society.

Jesus says whenever these children are accepted, he is accepted. The measure of greatness is measured by people's response to those who need our love and care and have nothing to offer in return. According to Jesus, the way to greatness is not ascending the spiral staircase to superiority and power. The way to greatness is descending down in to the depths with helpless people who suffer and grieve and who are considered "nobodies" in society.

In our obsessive quest to be No. 1 and be the best and the brightest in a competitive dog-eat-dog world, Jesus offers us a better way; from "my way" to "God's way." In a world that rewards the winners and loathes the losers, Jesus calls us away from the ego-driven life to the servant-driven life.

Seems strange, doesn't it? All our lives long we want to grow up in order to make something great of our lives. We are told to act like an adult. We strive to be independent, self-reliant and self-sufficient. Then when we're all grown up, we discover Jesus says the secret to greatness in the kingdom of God doesn't really have to do with any of those things.

In fact, greatness has as much to do with welcoming a child as it does with actually acting like one (Mark 10:13-16). We welcome the child by serving others who are vulnerable and dependent. We serve them, because we acknowledge our own vulnerability and dependence.

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