TRUE GREATNESS

Mark 9:33-10:16

Key Verse: 9:35

"Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.'"

In the last passage (9:14-32), Jesus said, "Everything is possible for him who believes." We also learned that unbelief is the root of all sins. We believe that Je­sus helps us overcome unbelief in our hearts. Today's pas­sage has many parts. But all the beatific sayings of this pas­sage direct our thoughts to Je­sus, who is truly great in the sight of God. All of us want to be truly great, don't we? We don't want to be petty, do we? Let's open our hearts to hear what Jesus has to say.

I. A truly great man is one who serves (9:33-37)

**First,** each person has a desire to be the greatest (33-34). While he was going up to Jeru­salem, where crucifixion awaited him, Jesus came to Caperna­um (33a). At that time, Jesus was bracing himself with the thought of his up­coming death on the cross. Even though he repeatedly taught his dis­ciples about his death and resurrection (8:31,32; 9:30-32), they had hardly accepted his teaching concerning his death and resurrection. In­stead, following Jesus on the way to Jerusa­lem, they were arguing about who was the greatest among them­selves. The question, "who is the great­est," troubled their hearts most.

So Jesus asked them in verse 33b, "What were you argu­ing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because they felt somewhat embar­rassed, because "who would be the great­est" was the subject of their argument. Nobody wanted to be the second man--not even Bar­tho­­lomew. Why do men struggle so hard to be the greatest? It is be­cause Al­mighty God made man in his own image (Ge 1:27). God put a su­preme desire in man to grow to the fullest extent until each one would be like a child of God. Be­cause of this, man has an endless desire to be the greatest (Ge 1:28). In the 19th century, most American teenag­ers yearned to be the great­est, like President Abra­ham Lincoln or nov­elist Mark Twain. At that time, American young people were very noble and had a steward­ship of the whole world. They lived sacri­ficial­ly for a greater purpose. They were con­cerned with all the needy peo­ple of the world. Their vision was worldwide in scale. As a result, God made this nation a most influen­tial nation in the world.

Jesus did not rebuke his disciples because of their argument be­hind his back. Rather, he deeply understood their conflict. So Jesus told them several basic principles to enable them to become truly great men.

**Second,** a truly great man is a humble man. Look at verse 35. "Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.'" Fallen men all have the idea that each is the number one man. In other words, fallen men are all ex­tremely proud. Therefore, if anyone wants to be the number one man, he must know how to humble himself before God. A truly great man is a hum­ble person who re­spects all oth­ers more than him­self. Moses is known as one of the greatest men in history because of his humbleness. Num­bers 12:3 says, "Now Moses was a very hum­ble man, more humble than any­one else on the face of the earth."

Paul was a very proud man. Before conversion he was an am­bi­ti­ous man. He studied and worked hard to satisfy his human ambi­tion. He be­came an indispensable per­son in the Jewish community. In the course of time, Paul had authority to consent to the execution of Ste­phen. In this way, Paul became a mur­derer in the sight of God. After conversion, when Paul thought about his past sins, Paul felt he did not deserve to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church of God (1Co 15:9). But when he thought about the forgiveness of Jesus who commissioned him as a light for the Gentiles, he could only say, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1Co 15:10). Paul became a truly hum­ble person before God until he changed his name from Saul, "the great­est," to Paul, "small one."

Jesus is the greatest because he was the most humble person in human history. He is God himself. But he gave up the glory, power and honor of the glorious kingdom of God and became like one of us. We call this the "Incarnation of Jesus." The holy God lowered himself in order to become a friend of tax collectors. The Pharisees criticized Jesus be­cause Jesus associated freely with tax collectors and public sinners. But Jesus did not mind, because he knew why he was a friend to them. Matthew 11:28 says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and bur­dened, and I will give you rest." Whenev­er we think of Jesus' hum­ble­ness, we are abun­dantly com­forted. If anybody wants to be great, he must learn how to hum­ble himself, for James 4:6 says, "God oppos­es the proud but gives grace to the hum­ble."

**Third,** a truly great man is one who serves others. General­ly, people want to be loved and served by others. Biblically speaking, they are fallen men with a beggar's mentality. Finally, such a person becomes useless in soci­ety. What is worse, such a person is worthless to God. On the other hand, one who knows how to serve others in the name of Je­sus is happy be­cause God gives him joy in his soul. He who serves becomes an indis­pensable person wherever he goes. When we medi­tate on Jesus' words deeply, we learn that the measure of our great­ness depends on how many people we serve.

There are many who want to serve but don't know how. So Je­sus demonstrated to his disciples how to serve others. Look at verses 36,37. "He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said 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.'" A newborn baby is helpless with­out the help of his parents. When Jesus said, "Whoever wel­comes one of these little chil­dren in my name welcomes me," he meant that one who helps the helpless is truly a great man. Helping the helpless is not an easy task, because helpless people have many bad habits, and they demand help from others endlessly. Helping the helpless seems to be in vain. But without help­ing the helpless, we cannot experi­ence the love of Jesus. Je­sus our Lord wants us to be truly great by helping the help­less.

II. A truly great man must be broad-minded (9:38-41)

In this part, Jesus tells us that narrow-minded people can­not be great. Look at verse 38. "'Teacher,' said John, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, be­cause he was not one of us.'"

Look at verse 39. "'Do not stop him,' Jesus said. 'No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me...'" Jesus rejected the group spirit that condemns others or another group. This exclu­siveness is a common malady among Chris­tian churches. We must remember how Je­sus our Lord tolerated all kinds of people in order to save them from their sins. We must strug­gle hard to overcome our narrow-mindedness. We must struggle hard to have a broad mind as gen­erous as that of Jesus. How can we be gen­erous? Verse 41 says, "I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name be­cause you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his re­ward." This verse gives a simple and direct answer to the perfidi­ousness of exclu­sivism. It also strong­ly encourages us to have a broad mind until we can give a cup of cold water to a servant of God who is not in our group.

III. A truly great man builds up new Christians (9:42-50)

**First,** a truly great man does not cause new Christians to stumble (42). Look at verse 42. "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who be­lieve in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large mill­stone tied around his neck." It is serious to cause young Chris­tians to stumble and sin and fall away from their faith in Jesus. Why is it so serious? It is because one who makes others stum­ble takes away their eternal life and in­heritance in the kingdom of God and sends them to hell. Causing new Christians to stumble seems to be a light matter. But it is sinning against God. There is too much peer pres­sure, and there are too many elements in this country that cause young Chris­tians to stumble. There are not many Bible-believing Chris­tians. But they must build up young Chris­tians' faith. We must defeat the ene­mies of God who cause young Christians to stumble.

**Second,** a truly great man must know the seriousness of sin­ning (43-48). Look at verses 43-48. "If your hand causes you to sin, 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. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" These verses speak of the serious­ness of sinning as Christians. If a Christian has something that causes him to sin, he must cut it off, no matter what the surgery or how much the cost in­volved. Otherwise, he will go to the place where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (48). It sounds as if we must cut off all the parts of our bodies because of our sins; still, we will be thrown into hell. But we should not underesti­mate Jesus' words con­cerning the result of committing sins. A truly great man must fight the spiri­tual battle with him­self, as well as serve others.

**Third,** a truly great man is a salty Christian (50). We Christians must be a good influence in society. Look at verse 50. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in your­selves, and be at peace with each other." We know that salt has vari­ous uses. But it has two outstanding characteristics. Salt gives good taste to food. We know how unpleasant a dish is when the salt is accidentally omitted in its prepa­ration. Salt is also a preservative. In secular society, purity is gone and spiritual realities are unknown. The Christian's task is to bring a purify­ing influence into that corruption. We Christians must encourage one an­other to be salty.

IV. A truly great man does not make use of the law (10:1-12)

Jesus left Galilee and came to Judea. While Jesus was teaching the word of God to the crowd of people as he was approaching Jerusa­lem, certain Pharisees came to test him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to di­vorce his wife?" (1,2) "What did Moses command you?" Jesus replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a cer­tificate of divorce and send her away" (4). Look at verse 5. "'It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,' Jesus replied." Here the words, "your hearts were hard," mean that the Pharisees had al­ready deter­mined to divorce by making use of the divorce law. The Pharisees' question was ill-gotten and had vicious intent. In ancient times, peo­ple were law­less. They divorced women at random. So Mo­ses gave them a law of divorce, in order to prevent lawless divorce. In this way, Jesus ex­plained why Mo­ses permit­ted di­vorce. Still, the Pharisees remained stone faced. But Jesus had great compassion on them. In order to open their spiritual eyes, Jesus began to teach them Genesis. Look at vers­es 6-9. "But at the beginning of cre­ation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mo­ther and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' (Ge 2:24). So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined to­gether, let man not separate." Jesus plainly told them that the motive of divorce is to com­mit adultery (10-12). An adul­terous person is not a great man. If anybody wants to be a truly great man, he should over­come adulterous desires toward wom­en.

V. A truly great man is like the little children (10:13-16)

People brought little children to Jesus for his bless­ing, but the disci­ples rebuked them (13). What did Jesus do with his boorish disci­ples? Look at verse 14. "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the lit­tle children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'" By blessing the children, Jesus explains further why the kingdom of God belongs to such children. There are many characteristics common to children. But two characteristics are notable. First, a child trusts his parents simply. Many a child thinks that his father is number one, and that his father can do everything. All chil­dren trust their parents. Sec­ond, a child is obedient. Many a child is happy to run er­rands. Many a child has a strong desire to please his par­ents. Chil­dren are like the ser­vants of the wedding at Cana in Gali­lee, who obeyed Je­sus' word and filled the jars to the brim out of their willingness.

Most people in the world have the head of a leviathan and the mouth of a crocodile and the chest of a sparrow and the legs of a flea. They talk big. They are out of propor­tion. They neither trust nor obey. In this time of sophis­tication, tumultuous complexity and diversity of culture, men can hardly have absolute faith in the word of God. In the midst of pandemic relativism, many a man is going crazy in a conflict between body and spirit in his soul. No man can simply accept the truth of God like a child. But with­out simple trust and obedience like children, no one can enter the kingdom of God.

This passage tells us how we can be truly great men in the sight of God. May God be gracious to you, to help you become a truly great man.