

You've Arrived...When Serving

Mark 9:30-37 (NIV)

³⁰ They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." ³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. ³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. ³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." ³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "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."

"You've arrived." Not a phrase simply meaning that you've made it to your destination, but "you've arrived" means that you've achieved success, accomplished your goals. You are the greatest. You've arrived!

Jesus' disciples were arguing over which of them had arrived at being the greatest. It's not hard to see why such a conversation would come up. They were traveling, being pulled away from crowds to be personally instructed by Jesus, the Chosen One, the Messiah. That's an ego boost in and of itself. Earlier in this chapter of Mark, a little more special treatment was given as Peter, James, and John were the only ones invited to see Jesus' transfiguration. At other times those three were again singled out for specific miracles that Jesus performed, seeing things the other nine didn't. Maybe this got them thinking that they had arrived, and that caused the disciples to argue over who was the greatest.

But this was a teaching trip. Once they arrived at their destination of Capernaum, the master teacher did his thing. When [Jesus] was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. (verses 33-34) They were embarrassed. Even though it was probably an animated and passionate conversation, they were ashamed to tell Jesus that they were arguing over which of them had arrived at being his greatest disciple.

We don't have that argument, do we? We don't argue about who's the greatest in the church. But maybe we silently assume who it is and forego the verbal argument. In my head, I know that I'm not the greatest, but, hey, at least I'm not as bad as some people. I at least show up to church every week. I'm faithful. I listen. I give generous offerings. Or maybe this isn't a thought in church, but it is at work. I look at others and see how much better of a work ethic I have, how much value I bring to this company. At home, I do all the hard work day in and day out. I'm not the greatest, but I'm not bad either. I'm pretty good. I'm a pretty hard worker. I'm an asset. And when someone compliments me on what I've done, I put on airs of false humility, saying, "Nah, I'm not really that good. I'm chief of sinners." But inwardly, maybe I'm thinking, "Yeah, I am pretty great."

But there's another side to this internal conversation. Maybe you don't ever think that you are any sort of greatness. Maybe you're convinced that you're worthless, that you have messed up too bad, that you can never be great. If that's your mindset, find your value and your worth in Christ and what he has done for you, how he has lived perfectly for you, that he was willing to spend his life and his blood to pay for you. He has forgiven you, made you clean. You are not your sins. You are not your mistakes. You are also not your accomplishments or lack thereof. You are great because God loves you and has made you his child and an heir of eternal life.

However, if, after examining your heart, you know there is some ego there, that maybe you are pretty good as a Christian or at least not as bad as some others, then Jesus, the master teacher, is teaching this lesson not just for his disciples, but for us too. [Jesus] took a little child whom he placed among them. 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 does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (verses 36-37)

This was contrary to their cultural expectations. Children in 1st century Israel were loved and cared for, but they were not considered important or influential or greater than adults. Greatness was measured in influence, power, control, and age. The people who make the decisions, who make the money, who make things happen – these are the greats. Like today, greatness was often measured in terms of accomplishments and kids hadn't accomplished anything. They didn't bring home the bacon. They didn't do all the housework. They didn't prepare the meals. Adults came first. The adage "children should be seen not heard" seemed to be in play. This is why Jesus uses a child as an example to his disciples about arriving at greatness. Serve and welcome this child, and this is greatness in God's eyes.

This is what Jesus himself did. He served little children as well as adults. He explicitly taught his disciples once again that “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” (verse 31b) Jesus served all of us with his life, death, and resurrection. He took time to bless little children, to hold them in his arms as he did on this particular day. He wanted them to know that he was there for them as well as everyone.

He didn’t do this in order to get people to stroke his ego or to worship and praise him as if he is some kind of egomaniac narcissist. He did this so that we would benefit, no matter our age or what the world thinks of our greatness or importance. He did this to repair our relationship with God, to make us new, to bring us worth and value that doesn’t rely on us or our abilities or accomplishments. He did this to bring us into his family, a part of his kingdom, to live with him forever in heaven. He didn’t do this because we had arrived, because we were so great, accomplished so much, worked so hard, but to bring us to him. He did this for all the times we thought that we were better, more important than others, that we should come first, that we should be served. Jesus served us and by doing so brought greatness to us in spite of our accomplishments, the things we think make us great.

God emphasizes over and over again that his Church is not about you or your accomplishments, but about what God has done for you and how we serve others. This is what greatness is. Have we, then, arrived at greatness? Do we serve and welcome little children and others as Jesus did?

Parents who have brought your children to church today, God bless you! It’s hard to bring kids to church. When they’re little, you try so hard to keep them contained, always seeming to need to wrangle them up, let alone having them sit still. You try so hard to keep them from making noises because you know that any sound they make might disrupt someone’s worship, as well as your own. So, you bring the soft books, the snacks, the coloring books to try to combat it. And by the end of worship, you’re frazzled, stressed out, maybe a little disheveled, a couple of cheerios stuck to your shirt and you feel like you didn’t get anything out of worship. Then there’s another layer of guilt thinking that your kid stopped others from getting something out of worship.

To you, Jesus says that you’ve arrived at greatness. I know it doesn’t feel that way. You feel like a failure, that this was not worth all the time and effort. Jesus say that you arrived at greatness because he served you with his life and then you took this time to purposefully serve your children by bringing them to church. Well done good and faithful servant!

Same to all you parents who kids are now grown and out of the house. Every time that you served them because God had served you, Jesus says that you have arrived at greatness. But that doesn’t mean that our service is over. How do we continue to serve and welcome the children today?

One thing that we do to serve the little children is to have children’s messages during worship, and I know all you adults get a whole lot out of the children’s messages too. This lets our children here know that Jesus has the same life and worth and value and accomplishments for them as he does the adults. Jesus wants our kids to know what he has done for them, to know that their sins, their wrongs, are taken away, that they are covered with Jesus’ perfection and will go to heaven just as much as your parents will.

How else can we serve children? Maybe it is taking the time to meet them, even though they’re probably super shy and will stare at you with concerned eyes when you do this. Can we thank a parent that they have served their children by taking the time and energy to bring them to church today? Can you thank them for the fact that you heard them in church, even if it made you work harder to concentrate on the sermon and worship?

Sadly, some well-meaning individuals have made children and their parents feel unwelcome, thought that their worship and their time was greater than the children’s. They’ve asked parents if they could keep their kids quiet, told them that they could worship online at home, or have given unsolicited parental advice as to how they could do it better. Before any of us say something to a parent or a child, stop and ask if we are saying this to serve and welcome the child and the parent or if we are saying this to serve ourselves? Be quick to listen, slow to speak.

So, have we arrived at greatness? In one way, absolutely not. We all need to improve as we have often served ourselves instead of others. In another way, we have arrived. We know that Christ has served us with his life, death, and resurrection and brought us greatness by what he has done. He served us so that we are forgiven, perfected. Because he served us and brought us greatness, we strive to arrive at greatness by serving and welcoming others, especially the little children. Amen.