

Who Is The Greatest?

The disciples have been with Jesus about two and one half years. They had heard Jesus' incredible teaching for Mark 1:22 says that the people "were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." That means His teaching was unmatched. Later in John 7:46 we will hear some officers of the temple say, "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks." The people had thought that John the Baptist was a great prophet, but it was Jesus to whom the crowds were really drawn (John 4:1). It was John the Baptist who said that he had to decrease and Jesus had to increase (John 3:26-30). It was Jesus who fed five thousand people and later four thousand with just a few loaves of bread and fish each time. In between both events Jesus took a casual walk on the water of the Sea of Galilee during a terrible storm. The disciples were witnesses of all of this. The disciples were privileged for they were allowed to walk, talk, and interact with Jesus day after day. As we will discover shortly, they felt privileged. It is easy to understand that Peter, James and John must have believed that they were preferred above the other disciples since they were part of Jesus' inner circle. Jesus had just recently taken them up to the Mount of Transfiguration - no one else!

DANGEROUS DISCUSSION. In this study (Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48), it will become obvious that the disciples thought that they were special men - the

greatest among men. We will be told that they had argued about who was superior. Why not? They were connected with the most significant man of their times. I was once a layman involved in a mega-church and had significant responsibilities. I felt important because of my connection to the church and the ministries that I had. Anyone who has had significant ministry understands those feelings. It is easy to understand why they might have felt superior to others and

we will soon discover that they felt like that too!

Our study is about a discussion that Jesus had with His disciples sometime after Jesus and the disciples had returned to Capernaum (Matt. 17:22-18:1). Along the way the gospel

of Luke tells us that the disciples had argued about who was the greatest.



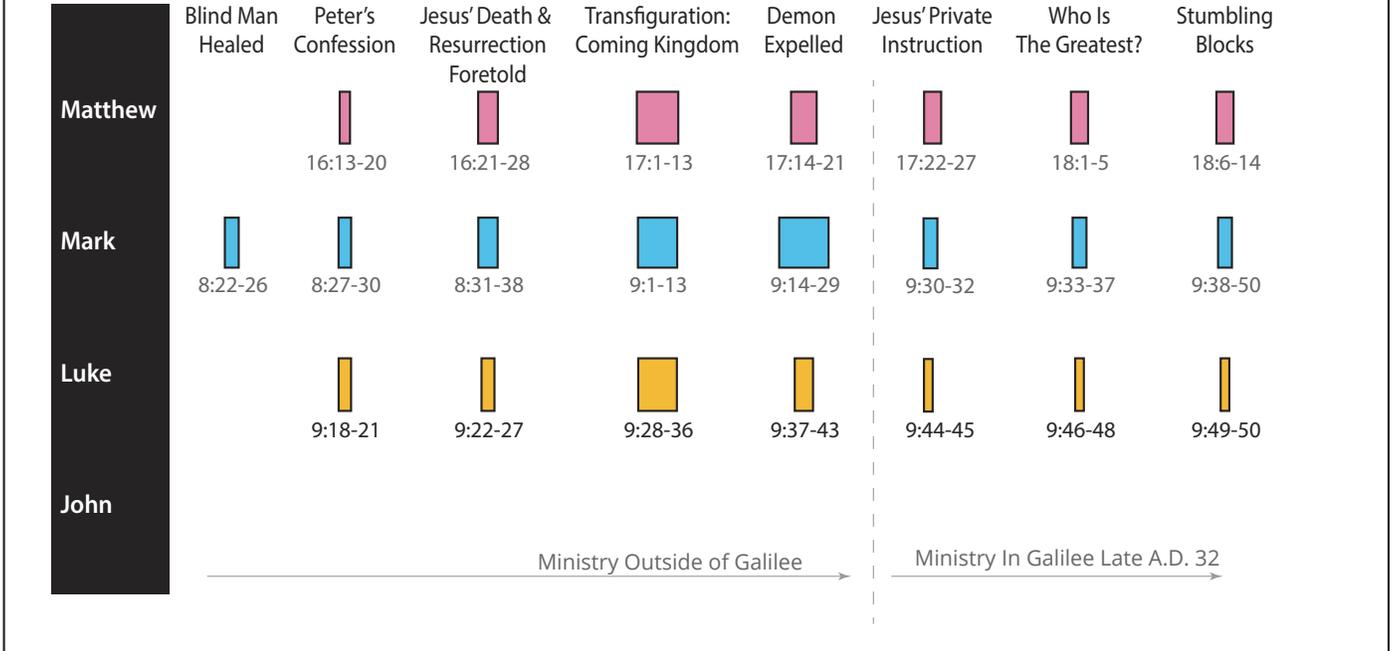
An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart . . . Luke 9:46-47 (NASB)

We are told that Jesus knew their thoughts but He waited to asked them about it until after He and Peter had a discussion about the two-drachma tax. Jesus told Peter to go fishing, find a coin in the mouth of a fish, and then pay the tax for both of them. But it is not clear if Peter accom-

plished this task before or after Jesus asked the disciples about their argument.

But we can be sure that Peter was present when Jesus asked them the question that Mark records for us.

Life and Heart of Jesus



They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?” Mark 9:33 (NASB)

Jesus is trying to open a conversation with the disciples. The Greek word that is translated as “began to” is *eperotaoi*. The verb is in the imperfect tense. It implies that Jesus repeatedly asked them this question and the next verse, Mark 9:34, reveals that the disciples repeatedly ignored His question since the phrase “kept silent” in verse 34 is also in the Greek imperfect.

But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. Mark 9:34 (NASB)

The disciples did not want to answer Him. They must have been embarrassed. Just imagine the tension that must have existed in the room when Jesus surprised them with the question, “What were you discussing on the way?” They did

not want to answer. Luke 9:47 reveals that Jesus knew¹ all along what the disciples had been arguing about. They had been discussing who was the greatest among themselves.

Matthew 18:1 reveals that finally the disciples did answer and after some discussion they finally asked Jesus a question, “Who *then* is the greatest . . .”

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Matt. 18:1 (NASB)

Someone might think that the disciples had a positive self-image since they were arguing about “who is the great.” But God is clear in the scriptures that our problem is not lack of a positive self-image. Our problem is that we think too much of ourselves and too little about others. In Phil. 2:3 we are told to not be selfish, conceited, but to be humble and to prefer others over ourselves. That is how God treats us. Our sense of value or worth comes from an understanding that

1. The Greek verb translated as “knowing” in Luke 9:47 is a perfect participle. This reveals that Jesus knew what they had been discussing before He asked the disciples what they had been discussing.

it is God who loves us, values us and showers us freely with undeserved favor. But the disciples wanted their own glory. They were not glorying in the truth that Jesus had chosen them, loved and spent His time with them. They were not ready to be evangelists, pastors or apostles, yet. Mark Moore tries to capture this truth with this,

These twelve men, chosen by Jesus, are really no better than the clamoring crowds that they often [ignored]. They are arguing about who is the greatest. Who will it be that gets to sit on Jesus' right and left hand? No doubt Peter can make a case for himself. After all, he's the one with the keys of the kingdom; he is the one who walked on water; he is the one who said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." In response, the others would say, "Yes, but you are also the one Jesus called 'Satan.' You are the one that nearly drowned with your stupid trick of walking on the water. And you are the one that made the idiotic suggestion of building three tabernacles on the Mount of Transfiguration." John and James no doubt stake their claim to prominence. In fact, in the near future, they will employ their mother to help them gain the upper hand among the Twelve (Matt. 20:20-24). After all, they have more corporate shares in the "Inner Three" than anyone. And Judas Iscariot, no doubt, put in his two cents.²

Proverbs 27:2 warns us to not praise ourselves to others,

**Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;
A stranger, and not your own lips. Prov. 27:2 (NASB)**

How often have you praised yourself to others? Some people use deprecating humility - stating that they are not very important and then wait for those around them to make a praiseworthy comment. Years ago I struggled with writing a resume feeling that I was bragging about myself. I have found that I am uncomfortable with people who brag about themselves and maybe it is because their pride is so blatant. Most people are not drawn to such people. Twenty-five verses later Proverbs 25:27 puts it this way.

Nor is it glory to search out one's own glory. Prov. 25:27 (NASB)

We should not even want to be praised if we are truly Christians. The heart of the disciples was not beautiful. They were not lovely men on the inside at this point - selfish and self-centered. Jesus knew it and so He confronted them.

THE MOST UNIMPORTANT PERSON. The gospel of Mark reveals that Jesus sat down, called the disciples to come closer and then asked another question,

Sitting down, He called the twelve and *said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Mark 9:35 (NASB)

In the Greek language there are four types of "if" statements. The first type is an "if" that assumes the answer is "yes." The second type assumes the answer is "no." The remaining two types of "if" statements have two different levels of uncertainty. Now this is important since Jesus uses the first type of "if" statement. That is, Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be first," and He implied in the "if" statement that the disciples did want to be first. Jesus understood the human sin nature. We are proud men and women who want to be considered better than everyone around us. We want the applause and approval of everyone. We love to be served and praised. That is the core problem in just about every human interaction and conflict. For example, when we feel unloved and unappreciated, we say that no one cares about us and we are all alone in life. Therefore, God tells us that He loves us (John 3:16), we are not alone, and He will always be with us (Matt. 28:20). He tells us that we can go to Him when we are discouraged and needing help (Heb. 4:16). God understands that in our sin nature we are very vulnerable.

Yet, Jesus told them that if they wanted to be first, there was a way to accomplish that. They could be first. All they had to do was be the servant of all. In Mark 9:35 Jesus uses three key words - first, last and servant. The Greek word that is translated as "first" is *protos*. The Greek word means "first, leading, foremost, prominent and most important." Jesus had it correct. That is what they were arguing about - who was the most important. The second word "last" comes from

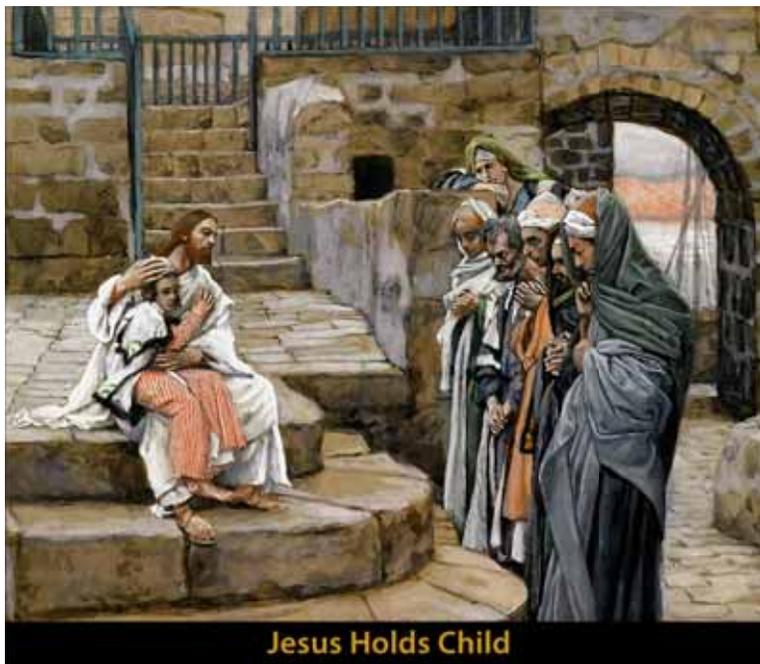
2. Mark Moore. The Chronological Life of Christ. College Press Publishing Company. 1996. vol. 1, pp. 351-352.

the Greek word *eskatos*. It means “last, lowest, most insignificant.” That is exactly what they did not want to be - most insignificant. Yet, Jesus tells us that we must be lower than that. We must be “servant of all.” The Greek word translated as servant is *diakonos*. The word refers to one who serves a master and consequently everyone else who comes into the house.

Such a man or woman is the most important person in the room, church, or community. He is not the one who brags about himself. I know a man who frequently brags about his important position of helping start new churches and various ministries. We can understand that such a person might feel important and very significant. The disciples did too! But Jesus wants us to get a different perspective about ourselves. When we feel important, Jesus wants us to understand that we have become the most unimportant person in the room.

THE ILLUSTRATION. Then Jesus illustrates this important truth. He calls a child to Himself (Matt. 18:2) and has the child stand beside Him (Luke 9:47). Then He picks the child up and holds him or her while teaching.

Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them . . . Mark 9:36 (NASB)



Jesus Holds Child

life, still learning, and very vulnerable. No wonder the Jews did not respect them. Yet, Jesus called the child to Himself anyway. He did this to make an important point about who was truly important. Therefore He picked up one who was not highly respected by the adults - a child. We do not know if the child was a girl or boy. We know nothing about the child except that he or she was physically immature.

THE FIRST TRUTH. There are two truths to Jesus’ illustration. Both truths depend upon you becoming like a little child. The first truth is that becoming like a little child is necessary to get into heaven. Here is Jesus’ first point.

... Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Matt. 18:3 (NASB)

The Jews thought that a person earned heaven by their good works. They thought the wealthy were going to heaven because they could give a great amount of money to the poor. They thought that the wealthy earned special favor with God. The Jews thought that reading the Torah daily and keeping a bunch of other rules would grant them heaven. Therefore, they must have been furious

when Jesus said that one must become like a child in order to get into heaven. Jesus not only challenged what they believed and the doctrines they were taught, but He also called them to stop seeking the honor of others. One must be like a humble child in order to get into heaven. He was not talking about behavior but an attitude. A new attitude was necessary.

In Matthew 5:3 of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus described the attitude that He is looking for in another way.

To us, this would appear to be a loving, gracious act or a good political move. But in Jesus’ day, this would have been frowned upon by the Jews. First century children had low status.³ The Greek word for “child” is *paidion*. This reveals that the child had not yet reached puberty. Children of that age are dependent, insecure, greatly inexperienced in

3. Grant R. Osborne, Matthew. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Zondervan. 2010. p. 669.

He says that the poor in spirit are the ones who will gain heaven. The Greek word *ptocos* that He uses for “poor” in verse 3 is one of several Greek words used for the poor and this one describes Lazarus in Luke 16:19-22. We are told in the Luke parable that Lazarus was covered with sores, ate the leftover crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table, and the dogs licked his wounds. Also, Lazarus was described as being poor or a beggar - a *ptocos*. Beggars are not rich, middle class, or the poor. Beggars are people who have nothing. They are at the bottom. They are beggars who are willing to accept anything and everything. They have nothing. That is the way we must come to God. We must come without demands or an agenda. The rich man in Matthew 19:16-26 did not come to Jesus as a beggar. He came with his wealth and simply wanted to add salvation to his possessions. Jesus sent him away empty saying that it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. All through Jesus’ ministry He called people to give up their lives in order to gain heaven. The message was that we must come as children, dependent and needy, in order to gain heaven. The message is that we have nothing to offer God in trade for salvation. We must come like beggars or like children pleading for the cookies 1 Timothy 3:5 says,

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy . . . 1 Timothy 3:5 (NASB)

Jesus’ message is that we must come as humble sinners in need of our holy God’s forgiveness - begging. He is our Lord (Rom. 10:9). Those are the folks who get into heaven. Humble people get into heaven not those wondering who is the greatest among the those in heaven.

THE SECOND TRUTH. The second truth from the illustration is found in the next two verses.

Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Matt. 18:4 (NASB)

The Greek word that translates as “humble” is *tapeioo*. The word was used to refer to “a person who is base, of low birth,

held in low esteem, or one in lowliness of heart.”⁴ The concept of lowly birth captures the idea well. One is not highly regarded because of their position in life when they are born to slaves, come from a lower class of citizens or from a poor family. In Luke 3:5 *tapeioo* is used to refer to every hill and mountain being brought low or brought down. Children are like that. They have no authority or status. They are at the bottom. Therefore, Jesus uses a child to teach that one who desires to be great must be willing to be brought low - to be like a child.

One of the greatest sources of modern illustrations is the delightful comic strip *Peanuts* by Charles Schultz. In one of them Linus and Charlie Brown are sitting and talking about their plans when they grow up. Then Linus says,

When I get big I’m going to be a humble little country doctor. I’ll live in the city, see, and every morning I’ll get up, climb into my sports car and zoom into the country! Then I’ll start healing people. I’ll heal everybody for miles around!” And he concludes his speech with, “I’ll be a world-famous humble little country doctor.”⁵

Linus did not understand humility. Humility blossoms as the Holy Spirit works in the lives of people if they are in fact Christians. In Luke 9:48 Jesus expands on the concept of humility (Matt. 18:5).

. . . and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great.” Luke 9:48 (NASB)

Did you notice that Jesus says that anyone who wants to be great must be the “least among *all* of you”? The Greek word Jesus uses for “least” comes from *mikros*. Our English word micron comes from *mikros*. It is a very small unit of measurement. If you want to be great, Jesus says that you must be the lowest of the low and be willing to accept children

4. Spicq, C., & Ernest, J. D. (1994). *Theological lexicon of the New Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

5. Michael Hodgkin. 1001 Humorous Illustrations For Public Speaking. Zondervan. 1994. p. 185

- those who are not valued in society. Jesus is describing all of the things that one must do in order to gain heaven. He is describing a heart attitude - a reality that must pervade the heart and life.

CONCLUSION. Springing from their argument about the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus used the opportunity to teach them that true humility accompanies salvation and greatness in the kingdom of heaven. I wonder if the apostle Paul has that honor? He said this,

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 1 Timothy 1:15 (NASB)

That is humility.