



How to Exceed at Greatness (without even trying)

Mark 10:37-45

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October 18, 2009

Someone left a drink coaster in the church office long before I arrived here. It reads: "Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite." James and John in today's lesson are trying to be Jesus' favorites: trying to find their place in their peer group – which they clearly feel is at the top!

There's a couple of points about this exchange that bear comment. First, Jesus, as he often does in Mark, is careful to remind these two upstart brothers that he is not the final decision-maker here. He tells them that such things as who gets what assignments are not his call. All that he says, all that he does, is God's will and work. And second, not only do James and John not know what they're asking for, they're going to get it anyway.

Remember when childhood, being a teenager, was something you couldn't wait to escape? No, not your kids', *yours*. At least sometimes, life seemed like an endless stream of "not yet's:" driving a car, going out on a date, going to bed when you want, not going to school. Doing what *you* wanted to do, responsible only to yourself. Adulthood – remember? – seemed a paradise.

Now that we're more or less grown up, we've experienced that being a grown-up isn't quite what it seemed back then: with privileges come responsibilities. But that youthful projection, that anticipation of what looks so great is what James and John are feeling. Even though Jesus has told his followers repeatedly – in fact, in the verses just before this -- that the path that he's on leads to suffering and death, they still haven't heard that – they're still thinking of glory and power in human terms, and they want it.

They've come from being very ordinary people doing ordinary things in an ordinary world to being among the inner circle of a man who's very clearly full of God's power and wisdom. They've gone from the drudgery of everyday existence, the struggle for

survival, in small villages, to being witnesses to miracles, even doing some themselves, and playing a part in God's great plan for his people.

It's very easy to think that you've arrived, that you've got it all together. My wife, Valerie, a couple of years ago was explaining to Sadie how to do something. Sadie, who has a good deal of dignity when she wants to, stood up to her full height, and said, "Mom, I *know* how to do this; I'm *six years old*." Seth's wondering aloud why he can't drive. In the same way, and just as silly, are James and John, who think they're ready to be big deals, major players in God's kingdom.

But everything's different in the kingdom, as Jesus patiently explains to the other ten exasperated disciples, who are ticked because they didn't think to ask first. Importance, greatness, has a different look from what they're used to: and it's different from what we're used to, as well. In the Kingdom of God, the people who lead are really servants of those who follow them; you show your power through humility and sacrifice.

There's a custom in the Marine Corps: in the field, the most senior officers eat last. That might seem strange, but there's logic behind it: leaders first makes sure everyone else is taken care of and there's enough to go around before taking care of themselves. The privates, after all, are the ones doing the most physical work, often taking the greatest personal risks, and the officers at the top are responsible for them.

How this plays out is a good illustration of our human desire to be or seem special, and how we can mess around with that simple servant ideal: in practice, officers take great care to figure out exactly where they fit in this reversed dining order. The closer to the end of the line you eat, the more important – at least, the more senior – you are. A different take on "the last shall be first, and the first, last" isn't it?

But the fact is, if you take this idea of service seriously, putting others first, and try to live it, it will change you. No one can think about other's needs, safety, and well-being every day without those thoughts becoming a habit, and that habit leading you to truly feel less self-important, to be less self-involved.

Most of us are pretty comfortable with where we are in the great pecking order by now. There aren't many privileges we're waiting to be old enough to enjoy, sad to say. But have you reflected lately on where *you* fit into your own view of the world?

I don't think that any of us consider ourselves to be the center of the universe, even our own universe. But if we were to use the solar system as a model for where we see ourselves and our relationships, what part of the solar system would you be? Hopefully, not the sun, the center; that, of course, is where God ought to be. And hopefully not Pluto – farthest from the light and warmth of the sun, wondering if you even belong to the family of planets or is just some loose rock out in space.

But if you're the Earth, well, that's a good place to be. The right amount of light and heat coming from the sun make you able to support life. Not by any effort of your own, but by where God has placed you, and what God has given you. Just by being who

you are, where you are, and what you are, you – like James and John – are destined for greatness.

You probably aren't seeking to be great right now. In Green Valley, the pinnacle of ambition seems sometimes to just be who we are. That's terrific! That's nearly the spot Jesus is calling us to: comfortable in who and where we are.

Here's the final test: how are you serving others?

A week ago Saturday, there was a wedding here in the sanctuary. I didn't perform the ceremony, but I was here keeping an eye on things, and learned that one of the bridesmaids' husbands is a pitcher for the Baltimore Orioles baseball club. Seth's a big baseball fan these days, and actually played his very first game that same day, so I went down and asked this player for an autograph, which he graciously gave me. Obviously, he didn't have to; it was something of an imposition on my part. But he did it.

Once the service was well underway, I went back to my study to work. Suddenly, this player was at the door. "Excuse me, I remembered that I had a ball in my car, and I'd like your son to have it." He'd written on it: "To Seth: Congrats on your first game. Our prayer is that there will be many more! God bless, Dennis Safarte, #45."

To write a couple of lines to an eight-year old on an extra baseball took almost nothing at all. He could do it, it would make a difference in someone else's life, so he did it.

It comes down to this: as citizens of the Kingdom of God, we serve one another, passing on what we have received from God, what we enjoy as who, what, and where we are.

This is humble service, service that isn't showy or even obvious. This is service seeking to be helpful. This is service that makes others' lives better and fuller, after the example of Jesus Christ, who gave up everything and "came [to us] that we might have life, life abundant." And it makes us great, great in Kingdom terms.

There was a legendary pastor in the first church I served, who in the 1930's preached a sermon that was still remembered by people I knew fifty years later. It was called, "I Can, I Should, I Shall." Christ calls us all to serve one another. God has given us great abilities and resources to serve. We can; we should. Shall we?