

**“Servant of All”
(Mark 9:35)
Pastor Espinosa**

Mark 9:35: *“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. This gospel in Mark 9 is enormously important for providing more insight on what it means to live as Pentecost disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, but it’s one of those Scriptures that is easily mishandled. That is, it is easy to put the emphasis on ourselves: God is telling us to get our acts together and be better servants; it’s all about us right? In actuality, it is amazing to consider how powerful the grace of God for us poor sinners is in fact put forth. And it is only the Gospel -- the saving message of God’s love and mercy for us in Christ -- that enables us to be servants of God at all. Miss this Gospel and turn Mark 9 into a morality lesson, and all is lost. So let’s *not* do that.

We get a bird’s-eye view on how our Lord’s relationship with our brothers, the apostles had been shaping up. Our Lord had been extraordinarily patient with them. He needed and wanted to tell them what was coming: He was going to be delivered into the hands of men, who would kill him, but after three days, He would rise (v 31), but they were not ready to hear this until they were clear on Jesus’ identity.

They needed to know WHO Jesus was, just like we need to know WHO Jesus is! Without this crucial step, then there’s no point in trying to explain His saving work, His power in our lives as the children of God. This connection is true to this day. Our first priority Christians is to KNOW Jesus and everything else will follow, but if – for example – you try to be a good servant of God WITHOUT knowing Jesus, then you may just as well start hitting your head into a wall. At that point “servanthood” will not be your willing service to God, but a staggering source of frustration and resentment OR an enterprise for self-aggrandizement; your attempt to leave your mark for the sake of your pride.

First things first...**know** Jesus!

What does that mean? Know His Word – which intimates that one would hear His Word (like you’re doing now), pray His Word (which incidentally is the key to a fruitful prayer life...if you try to be creative to generate your own words, watch your prayer life shrivel up, but if you base your prayers on the Word of God, watch them be full, this is why the Psalms for example are such a rich source for prayer). The idea is that you are striving to receive His Word in as many ways as possible, so that His Word forms in your heart and in your mind. “Knowing Jesus” also means that we seek to walk or live in the way of His Word. So don’t let anyone leave you hanging in ambiguity when we say “know Jesus”:

1. Receive His Word.
2. Pray His Word.
3. Walk in His Word.

This past week Traci and I saw the movie “War Room” on my day off. And without getting into a theological dissertation on the movie, it did impress me with one particular thought: our Lord Jesus taught His disciples (including the ones like us in the 21st century) to pray. Matthew 6:6: “But when you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Such a simple instruction, but to follow it – not out of legality, but in freedom and in love – is to practice “knowing” Jesus. This is what we mean by “know Jesus.” Again:

1. Hear Him speak to you through His Word (and for us that ALSO means receiving His Holy Sacrament. Talk about knowing Jesus when we receive His miraculous gift to us of His very body and blood!).
2. Speak His Word back to Him in prayer.
3. Walk and live in His Word.

But I forgot to mention that before we can ever get to know Jesus, Jesus needs to get to know us and the disciples in Mark 9 are a microcosm of what Jesus learns about you and what He learns about me. And with this realization, we start to have some serious reservations about ever coming to know Jesus: if getting to know Jesus means that He must thoroughly get to know us first, then maybe I don’t want to get too close to Him after-all. But He *does* get to know us, just like He got to know His first disciples extremely well.

They were ready (at least they *should have been* ready!) and so He tells them what’s going to happen. Isn’t that awesome?! None of us like to be kept in the dark. Now the disciples would never be able to make this charge against the Lord. Jesus was telling them *exactly* what was going to happen. He was letting them in on it; they would not be kept in the dark at all!

Verse 31: “*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.*”

Jesus was being lucid: “now that you know WHO I am, I am going to tell you my beloved followers WHAT is going to happen...what I will DO...I’m going to let myself be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill me and after three days, I will rise!” Jesus wants us to know Him...who He is and the most vital things to know about His life, but there’s just one problem: on our own, He may as well be talking to a brick wall.

Verse 32: “But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.”

Jesus was getting to know them and we are just like them. And Jesus knows it. You might think that under such circumstances, Jesus might back out of this one-sided relationship. But He didn't and He doesn't! He loved us and loves us too much to ever do that.

He knows you even when you are quite foggy about knowing Him. He understands you when you may totally be confused about Him. He loves you when you are filled with fear instead of faith and can't even open your mouth to pray. He knows you and not only does He not hold it against you, but He just loves you even more.

But our not knowing and not understanding, does indeed lead to fear and when fear fills our hearts, other problems ensue. Here's the progression presented here in Mark 9 and remember, Jesus saw it all and knows it all:

1. We have a lack of faith (by virtue of our lack of understanding).
2. Our very next reaction is fear.
3. And our next reaction is pride.

So the disciples didn't understand the Lord, because what He said about what was going to happen wasn't what they wanted nor was it what they expected. They had other plans. The Lord was going to set up a kingdom on earth and through their lack of knowing Jesus' words, they defaulted into fear and when we do that, the next coping mechanism is pride. Our Lord was preparing to die for the sins of the world, but all that the disciples could talk about was their ranking in the future earthly kingdom that they were imagining. They were consumed with *their* resumes, *their* careers, *their* accomplishments, *their* recognitions...*their* pride while the Lord was getting ready be betrayed by men who would kill Him. Permitting it to happen so that He could save sinners who are always too busy only thinking about themselves. We are full of pride and serve ourselves, but He is full of humility and love...and chooses to serve us.

This is what this gospel in Mark 9 is really revealing to us. Jesus is the first because He became the last. He became the Servant of All. Mark 9 makes this clear. Jesus refers to Himself as “the Son of Man” and this was a title esp. used to describe His passion and death. And yet, it was also clearly a Divine Title, a title of power as well. It is the Son of Man for example who has authority to judge all men, but this power is not for pride or ego. This power is for service. The Son of Man is also the representative and sacrifice for all men – for all men and women, for all boys and girls – the Son of Man took upon Himself the sin of the world and He would suffer and die with this sin on Himself and His blood would cover and pay for the sins of all men...the Son of the Man is glorious, but His glory would be seen in His humility to die in the stead of all men so that all men would be saved from the curse of sin and death. These additional Scriptures help us to understand His true mission for us:

Mark 10:44-45: “and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Luke 22:27: “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”

Philippians 2:5-8: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

And why again? To save us from our sin. David Schmitt explains: *“The ways of God are opposed to the ways of humanity and the gracious work of God is hidden in his violent rejection by all. Our world’s fascination with things spiritual tends to identify love with tolerance and replace forgiveness with acceptance. Our Lord’s revelation, however, reveals the depth of the love of God. Jesus does not tolerate sin nor accept it, rather he dies for it that those who kill may be forgiven, those who persecute may be loved, and those who live with superficial understandings of faith and discipleship may be awakened to the depths of love and life within God’s kingdom.”* (Concordia Journal, Summer 2009, volume 35, number 3, 310-311)

But our hearts with sin still struggle to understand, so our Lord conducts an extraordinary object lesson:

Verses 35-37: “And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, ‘If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.’ ³⁶And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷‘Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.’”

This was not a lesson on sentimentality, but rather the child represented the Lord Himself. In the eyes of the world, how important is a little child? To the world – in concert with the evil one – they are expendable and even used for profit. To the world they are nothing. This is the point Jesus is making. “If you receive this child, you receive me -- and the world considers me as nothing -- and if you receive me, you receive the Heavenly Father.” The child is symbolic of Jesus. His greatness [which saves us] is seen in not being great, not even close so that all of the not great ones – like you and me -- would have a chance to live. No matter how terrible your sin is, Jesus became a worse sinner. No matter how low you perceive yourself to be, Jesus became lower. No matter how much guilt you have, Jesus’ guilt was worse. No matter how devastating your shame, Jesus’ shame was so great on the cross of Calvary that the Heavenly Father turned away from His Only Son.

Too many people assume that the way to salvation is to become good enough for God, when all along, the way to salvation is for God becoming bad enough for you (Jesus became your sin – 2 Cor. 5:21 – and your curse – Galatians 3:13).

At the same time, the Lord isn't saying, "Don't aspire to be first!" We should aspire to be first, but not according to the world's way; just God's way!

Now that we know that Jesus became our servant, it is now more than possible for us to be servants. If God would lower Himself to serve me, then it is nothing for me to lower myself to serve others.

If the Lord could serve even me; if the Lord could serve even you, then we can serve. If He became lower than even us, then we should be glad to become lower than others. In this way we are like our Savior who has made you first. First, because He was willing to take on your flesh and be the Son of Man who took your debt for sin; first, because He was willing to have Himself delivered over to people like you and me who would kill Him, but thereby be saved by Him; first, because He actually died with His blood covering all your sin; first, because His resurrection has delivered you from death to life. In the eyes of God, you're first now. It is now our joy to serve others since no one has ever been as last as our Savior Jesus...for you, for me, for all sinners. Our lives are new now. We are servants of God and servants to all because God served us and still serves us in Jesus, the Servant of All.