

First and Last

Mark 9:30-50 (ESV)

January 26, 2003

“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” There is nothing wrong, as such, with the aspiration to be first. However, Jesus redefines the means and the method of being first, which in turn alters the goal and the purpose of being first, and therefore changes the whole reality of being first. For he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “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.” That is, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And Jesus is first not in spite of being last but precisely because he was last and by means of being last. The Christ is the Christ by being the suffering servant of the Lord. He chose the hardest way for himself to lead us into glory. And his hard choice sets the way for those of us who would follow him.

Thanks be to God that Jesus chose the hard way! He could have been a king or emperor. He could have been the richest man in the world. He could have been an adventurer or a philosopher. He could have lived a life of comfort and ease. But instead, he chose to be crucified for us. He chose to suffer on our account. He chose to take on the sin of the world, to bear our burdens, and to suffer our grief. He became last in the world, something detestable and contemptible, not merely as a strategy to be first, but in order to glorify God and to save us.

There is a unique confluence here. We have no true knowledge of human beings apart from the knowledge of God. We have no true knowledge of God apart from the knowledge of human beings. How, then, do we start? Jesus Christ is the one person from whom we get good knowledge about both. That is, Jesus reveals God to us, and Jesus reveals true humanity to us. So, we should start with him.

Today’s reading from the gospel according to Mark tells us two things about Jesus. First, Jesus is the one who will be betrayed and killed. He placed himself under the control of human beings who used the highest religion of the day to condemn him and the highest legal system of the day to convict and execute him. He had harmed no one. He had done no wrong. He was innocent of all charges. Yet he willingly suffered not only terrible pain and death but also shame and humiliation, nailed to a cross for public horror and ridicule on a garbage heap outside Jerusalem. This is who he was and is. Is Jesus a teacher, a leader, a moral example, and a friend of children? Yes, of course. But he is far more. He is the innocent sufferer. He undertook this for our sake.

The second thing said here is that Jesus would be raised from the dead. The disciples could not understand that he had to die, let alone that he would rise! Jesus Christ, the innocent sufferer, would be made alive again. The way to resurrection life is through the death of the self. The only way to having anything important is through letting go. The way to joy is through sorrow. The way to goodness is through suffering under evil, not through perpetuating evil by responding in kind.

This new and risen life of Jesus is the promise of our own. There is more to life than we can see here! What does this mean for us? The purpose of life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is to restore us to fellowship with God and Christ and therefore with each other. That starts here at the cross. What is that goal worth? It is worth everything! “And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” As hard as this is, the solution to our problem is not that easy. We cannot overcome sin by cutting off a hand, cutting off a foot, or tearing out an eye. Even if we were willing to do so, that would not accomplish it. What we need is a new heart. And that, thanks be to God, is what we are given by the one who did give his hands, his feet, and his heart for our sake on the cross.

What does this mean? The promised restoration of life and fellowship with God is more valuable than anything this world offers. It is more important than the nation. It is more important than employment. It is more important than family. It is more important than anything else in the world. This is strong language. The high value of the new life and fellowship is not to be taken lightly. It cannot be entered into casually.

Jesus Christ is the one who suffers and dies on our behalf. He is also the one who rises to new life as promise of our own. Therein he begins to tell us not only about himself but also about who God is. God is the one who shows himself to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

God had been revealed as the Creator who acted by the sheer power of his word. God had been revealed as the Judge who condemned wrongdoing and established justice. God had also been revealed as the Redeemer, the God of mercy, especially at the Exodus. Jesus pointed beyond this to the greatness of the love of God, who came to be with us as one of us. How great is God’s love for us! How wonderful it is that God would do this for us!

What does this mean for us? First, God’s love for us leads us to love and praise God. This is the great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” As the Shorter Catechism puts it, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” That is, the ultimate purpose of human existence is to worship and honor God and to be centered upon him now and always. We do this through worship, prayer, work, study, commitment, devotion, witness, and service. God’s grace elicits our gratitude and thanksgiving.

Second, God’s love for us leads us to love and serve our neighbor as ourselves. There is a sense in which we cannot serve God. God not need anything. God is not hungry. God is not thirsty. God is not lonely. What can we do for God? We can serve those about us who are needy. We can serve them with love, care, encouragement, food, clothing, shelter, the gospel, and prayer. God’s grace elicits our graciousness toward each other.

Who, then, is God? God is the one whose love is made known to us in the suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the one whose love calls for our love and praise in return and also for our love and caring for our neighbors.

Given our knowledge of Jesus Christ and of God, we now turn to the question of who we are. We are the ones to whom Jesus came, for whom Christ died, and for whom God raised Christ to life again. We are the ones created and saved to love God and neighbor in response to God’s love. We are the children of God because Jesus Christ, the son of God, calls us his own.

What does this look like? How does it apply to our lives or to this church? We have a negative example in today’s reading. The enormity of Christ’s impending death seems to have been lost on the disciples. “They did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.... On the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” Can you imagine? They were so self-absorbed that they did not realize what was happening. They were so self-centered that they did not see what he was telling them. They were so concerned about being first themselves that they did not notice that their leader, Lord, and master was moving into last place. They could not hear it. They could not bear it. They could not comprehend it. They could not accept it.

One of the hard things about the failure of the disciples is that it is remembered as a warning for us. We have no particular interest in their shortcomings. We gain nothing by gloating over them. The point is that we run the risk of making the same mistakes and with less excuse since they have gone before us. We, too, within the church, run the risk of being self-absorbed, self-centered, and concerned about being first. We, too, run the risk of not realizing, not seeing, and not noticing what Jesus is doing. But now we have been told. Now we have heard. Now we know that he went to the cross for us and that he rose for us. Thanks be to God!

In that Christ is the one who chose to be crucified, we are the ones for whom he chose to be crucified. This is who we are. This affects everything about us. The pursuit of being first can no longer be about personal prominence, wealth, influence, or status. The reality of being first is now and forever defined in terms of service, lowliness, meekness, humility, giving, and self-denial, being “last of all and servant of all.” If we would follow Christ, this is how we do it. This is the only way to do it. Any other way of life would be to follow another leader, another inclination, another path to another destination.

Jesus did not condemn our concern with greatness; he radically redefined it. I hope we all aspire to greatness! God has given us good and wonderful gifts: life, breath, health, mind, heart, wealth, freedom, skills, talents. We dare not neglect them! We dare not give them back on the last day and say, “Thank you, but I could not use these!” No, we have been given good and wonderful gifts for a reason, to use them for greatness.

How is this greatness defined? Jesus says, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” He turns everything upside down! “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” Jesus, the innocent sufferer and the Son of the loving God, says those who would follow him are to seek greatness in the lowliness and humility of service. He gives us the best example not only by touching the untouchables but also and especially by dying on the cross. This stands against all our other concepts of greatness: wealth, power, position, fame, and force. But the greatness of Christian life and of human life is defined by service.

What does this look like for us? All Christians are servants. Every church member has a service. What is yours? How do you serve God and neighbor in your daily life and work? How can we witness, in word and action, in our everyday lives, to our conviction that other people are also children of God? The first definition of greatness is service.

The second definition of greatness is this: Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” This was startling. Children are supposedly held in high regard today, but that was not the case then. Greatness is defined not by being high and mighty but by welcoming, touching, and hugging the smallest, the least, the weakest, the poorest, the sickest, and even the most confused and lost. Christian greatness and true human greatness have to do with welcoming one another. As God welcomes us into his kingdom, so are we to welcome each other here. This is who we are. This is what we are about. We, the Christian church, are called by Christ to be a place of welcome, a place of greatness and excellence in being welcoming. In fact, we are called not to wait for others to come here but to go out and bring people

here! It is part of gospel to welcome others here and so to welcome Jesus Christ and God his Father.

Grace Covenant has been doing this for the eighty-eight years. The greatest challenges, the greatest opportunities, and therefore the greatest responsibilities still lie ahead of us. Our capacity for living and sharing the gospel, for welcoming hundreds of people into this church, will be nurtured, challenged, and stretched as it never has been before! We are destined for greatness here, not because of us, for we are not that great, but because of the greatness of God. We are destined for greatness in service and welcome. “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Minister
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, VA 23220-2925
Telephone 804-359-2463
Facsimile 804-278-6298
goodloe@grace-covenant.org