

September 22, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Be First by Being Last!

The Milwaukee Brewers won their division for the third time in four years. Very impressive. Fans are shouting, “We’re number 1!” Meanwhile, the Chicago White Sox are on pace to have the worst record ever in baseball. I am guessing that White Sox fans are not boasting, “We’re last!” No one likes being last. There’s nothing wrong with winning or being first, but the devil is quick to use that to get you to become proud. This morning, Jesus teaches us an important lesson about following him in faith. Instead of being proud, we are to be humble. In fact, in God’s kingdom, the humble person is greater than the proud person. Jesus encourages us to be first by being last.

Selfless service is rarely recognized

I have yet to see a news story which says anything like, “Tired mother stays up all night with sick child.” Or, “Lonely widow prayers through each name in the church directory three days each week.” News reports usually focus on dramatic and unusual events. It’s not wrong to report on a fire or an accident, but what gets overlooked is the true humble service that keeps our whole society working. The news will tell you about some celebrity’s dating life, but completely overlook a man who swallows his ego and agrees to go to counseling so he can be a better husband. The rich and famous get lots of attention. Selfless service is rarely recognized.

We are often selfish

You’ve all been on the freeway and seen a sign say, “Left lane closed in 1 mile.” Most drivers make sure to get in the right lane right away. But there are always a few who speed in the left lane to get in front of others as if they are more important. We probably don’t want to admit it, but we are all selfish like that. Every sin, beginning with Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, comes from selfishness. We do not want to follow what God says in his commandments. We want to do our own thing. Pride is the basis for every argument as each person tries to push their viewpoint on the other. Even though so many of you do so much for so many others, our sinful nature does not want to serve others. When someone asks for our help again, and then again, and then again, we often sigh, “Really?” It’s not just that we might be tired. Deep in our hearts is the thought, “I don’t want to help you.” Our sinful nature argues, “Who’s going to help me?” It is so, so easy to look at others and think, “I am smarter.” Or, “I know the Bible better.” Or, “I am more sincere in my faith.” Or, “I have more money.” Or, “I have a stronger work ethic.” Etc. We like to compare ourselves to others and say that we are better. We probably don’t want to admit it, but we are all selfish.

It is very important for us to hear this warning against pride. We could make the argument that pride is more dangerous than other sins because pride, by its very nature, turns your focus on yourself and away from God. King Solomon warned that (Proverbs 16:18) pride goes before the fall. If we are full of ourselves, then we are not full of Jesus. And the devil is so quick to exploit our vulnerability. When we humbly help others, the devil suggests, “God must be pleased with you. No one else helped like you did.” And we soon become proud of our humility. Some might even help others simply because it makes them feel happy and important and so even though they are helping others, they are really serving themselves. Pride is a mortal threat to our faith.

Disciples were selfish

Even Jesus’ disciples were infected with pride and selfishness. We see that on display here in Mark 9. Jesus was on his final journey to Jerusalem. He took some private time with his disciples because he needed to teach and re-teach them what was going to happen in Jerusalem. He would be handed over, this is, betrayed. He would be killed and then rise from the dead. The disciples could not understand what he was saying. He had always walked away from dangerous situations. Wouldn’t he do it again? What did he mean by rising again? None of them asked him to explain what he meant because none of them wanted to admit that they did not understand. They were all too proud!

You would think that when Jesus said he would be betrayed, they would have been horrified. “Could I be the one?” And when Jesus said that he was going to be killed, you would think that they would feel sorry for him. But they were too proud. Jesus asked them (:33), “**What were you arguing about on the road?**” Again, when Jesus’ asks a question, he already knows the answer. He asked the question to lead the disciples to realize that they were sinning. Mark tells us that they all stayed quiet because they were arguing about who was the greatest, the most important disciple. Really? Grown men who spent nearly 3 years walking and talking with God in the flesh, and they were acting like 3rd grade boys arguing at recess. They were even too proud to admit that they were doing something wrong. There was no repentance. No, “I’m sorry.” They were selfish. They were proud. For the sake of their souls, Jesus needed to teach them.

Jesus gently taught them

Jesus had every right to bark at his disciples, “Three years with me and you have learned nothing! You don’t care that I’m going to be killed. And you are arguing like little children about who is the greatest! Instead of going to Jerusalem with me, you can go to hell.” Instead, Jesus gently taught them

explaining (:35), **“Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”** Our world has it all upside down and backwards. In our world, greatness means being more important or more popular or more powerful or having more money than others. God says that being great means imitating Jesus and serving others in love.

As the perfect teacher, Jesus even used an object lesson to help the disciples remember the point. He picked up a little child and held him in his arms. He showed that he cared for that little child who could do nothing for him. We could paraphrase what Jesus says in verse 37 this way, “If you want to be on page with God, then welcome, care about, serve others like you would serve a little child who can do nothing to pay you back. Care for others ‘in my name,’ as an expression of your love and trust in me.”

Jesus especially taught his disciples by continuing toward Jerusalem where he would be betrayed and killed. That is what the disciples and all of us needed. For all of the self-centered pride in our hearts and our stuck-up words and our selfish actions, we needed Jesus to die for us. He owed us nothing and we could offer him nothing. Still, he demonstrated perfect selfless love for his disciples and us as he continued his death march to Jerusalem.

Jesus gently teaches us

Just as Jesus gently taught his disciples, he gently teaches us. First of all, he made sure that Mark wrote down this story about the disciples so that we could learn from them. We realize that we are sinful like they were. We realize that we need to repent, to turn away from a selfish attitude and turn toward Jesus for forgiveness. When the Holy Spirit leads us to admit that we are doomed sinners, that we are last, then the Lord moves you to first place standing in front of the line looking at Jesus hanging on the cross. Then and there you clearly see what true loving service is. Jesus was willing to suffer the injustice, the humiliating shame, the unspeakable pain, even death itself, in order to give you what you needed the most. He paid for your sins. He forgave you. He experienced hell so you could experience heaven.

We find joy in selfless service

Wouldn't it have been neat to be that child that Jesus lifted up in his arms? For the rest of your life you'd tell others, “Jesus – God in the flesh – held me in his arms.” You are that child. You are the one that Jesus cared for, that Jesus loves, that Jesus saved. Our sinful nature says, “I want to be great so that others will serve me.” Our spiritual nature says, “I want to be great so that I can serve others. Jesus lived and died for me! If he did that for me, then, I can help this other person.” As we see all that Christ did for us, our hearts melt. Within us grows a Christ-like obsession to serve others, without

counting the cost, without any desire to be repaid. When we help someone, we do NOT spin the I-pad around for them to fill in how much of a tip they are going to give us, like what happens at restaurants. One fellow was unwinding to his pastor about how difficult it was to keep helping someone. His pastor said, “If Jesus asked you to do it, would you?”

I do need to mention quickly that self-care is important. Before you can help others, you need to make sure that you are healthy. For example, if a loving daughter dedicates herself to caring for her mother in her dying days, she can not be at her mother's side 24/7. She'll lose her own health and then not be able to help mom at all. The Lord wants you to take care of the body he gave you. Taking care of yourself is important so that you CAN serve others.

I've heard many say things like, “I'm just a mom, a factory worker, an old retiree, a student, a garbage collector, a burger flipper, etc.” That's the wrong way to look at things. You are not just a lowly person. You are a shining light in God's kingdom. You are the hands, face, voice of Jesus to help others. One of the kindest Christians I ever met took care of porta-potties for a living. Our society needs that kind of help too. No service is unimportant or insignificant when it is done in faith, in Jesus' name.

I am constantly amazed at those who serve the disabled and aged and disadvantaged – nurses, social workers, counselors, teachers, etc. It is inglorious in the eyes of the world to change a diaper or wipe up someone's vomit. But God says it's glorious because that is the help people need. I think of a lady who would visit Heritage Nursing Home and ask, “Who has not been visited lately?” Then she would just sit and talk and make that person feel important. I think of a nurse who stayed after her shift, when she was not getting paid, to sit with a lonely patient who was suffering and kept massaging his back. I think of how many volunteer hours and hard-earned dollars go into this ministry. Thank you sincerely. I could go on for hours. Instead, I'll let you continue this sermon as you go back into the world and put your faith into practice wherever God has placed you and whomever God has placed in front of you to help. As we humbly serve others, we might be last in the eyes of the world, but God says you are first in his kingdom. In other words, be first by being last. Amen.