

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “More: Last of All”

**Dr. Jay Howell**

Mark 9:33-50

January 7, 2024

Today we start a new series going through a part of the Gospel of Mark. This section of Mark’s Gospel finds Jesus trying to convey to his disciples a series of very challenging teachings, challenging because they seem to run counter to how they’re wired, how they assume things are supposed to go.

I think we’ll find they end up pretty challenging for us, because they describe a life, a path, a worldview that subverts so much of what we just kind of assume is how things are supposed to work. But on the other side of it, there’s an invitation into this life-giving freedom in following Jesus.

Let’s go to God’s Word together. Mark 9:33-50

*Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*

*John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.*

*“If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and 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 to have two feet and 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 to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.*

*“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Almighty God, in the ministry of your Son, he walked; he taught; he breathed; he sweat; he bled. He did so much beneath his own glory that we struggle even to comprehend just how the eternal God, the Word of God, could be made flesh and dwell among us. And yet by your Word, you reveal yourself to us. Reveal yourself anew this day, we pray. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

How do you measure greatness? Who's the GOAT? Y'all know that acronym, right? The GOAT? The Greatest of All Time? If you were asked who's the GOAT of the Tennessee Volunteer, or the GOAT of world leaders, or the GOAT of artists, how would you go about assessing that?

Be honest now. If you didn't just hear the Scripture passage and what Jesus said and already have some kind of idea what the sermon's going to be about, how would you go about measuring greatness? Well, your answers would probably be the same as mine. If we're talking about the greatest athlete, then we're talking about numbers of championships and awards won, statistics in points, yards, touchdowns, three-pointers, no-hitters, whatever it might be. If we're talking about the greatest world leader, then we'd probably say well it has to do with the achievements in politics or policy or on the battlefield or in influencing others in some way that shaped the path of history and rose to the occasion to meet some great crisis. If we're talking about the greatest artist, then we'd probably say well it has to do with what works they completed, the scope of their work, the expertise, the emotional impact, the historical significance, whether its music or painting or sculpture or architecture.

And for all of those examples, and really for whatever other arena you can think of, let's be honest, if we were asked to say, who's the GOAT? We would think in terms of what achievements and abilities lifted that person over someone else, over everyone else when it comes down to it.

We hear "greatest" or the "GOAT," and we immediately think in terms of what makes one person more than another. It's common sense. It comes naturally to us. We are inclined to consider how we stack up against each other in terms of stature or influence or power or achievement or wealth. We are inclined to draw dividing lines between what makes some great or qualified and what does not, between who has the right pedigrees and bonafides, and who does not.

But Jesus teaches on different terms. You would think his disciples would start to catch on, but they don't.

You see just about a week earlier, Jesus had taught them, saying that any who would follow him must deny themselves and take up their cross. "For those who want to save their life," he said, "will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35). Now in the disciples' defense, that sort of thing would not have computed. It wasn't an easy point to understand, much less apply, because it definitely doesn't seem like the lesson really landed after the first crack at it.

On the way to Capernaum, Jesus hears the disciples arguing about something along the way, and when they arrive, he asks them what it was about. I think he heard exactly what they were arguing about, but he wanted them to admit it. And as if to prove his point, and perhaps demonstrating that on some level they understood at least a little of what Jesus had taught them about dying to self, about taking up one's cross, about losing one's life to save it, because when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about, they are silent.

It's like when you ask a child "What happened?" when you know what went wrong, when you know that one of them just threw a Magna tile at the other's face, bringing the other one to tears. You ask, "What happened? Why is he crying?" and they say, "I don't know." Not that I have any experience in such things.

The disciples are silent, but Jesus knows what they were arguing about anyway. They were arguing about who was the greatest. I truly wonder what that sounded like. "I've been with Jesus the longest!" "Well, I have the most training and education before this!" "Well, I'm the one Jesus talks to the most." "Well, I was there when Jesus did this." "Well, I was there when Jesus did that." And so on and so on. And so, he addresses the dispute. He says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The implications of that are revolutionary, because it flew in the face of generally accepted practice, of those assumptions about greatness, about all those recipes to be the GOAT, about achievement, about excellence, about success.

And then as if to double down on the point, Jesus takes a little child and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Now we hear that and we hear, “Oh how sweet,” and it is sweet. It’s also revolutionary in its own right. Children weren’t the commonly accepted treasure that they are today. Not to say parents didn’t love their children back then, for of course they did, but in terms of social standing, they amounted to little. They were the future, sure; everyone understood that. But as children until they got old enough to pull their own weight, they were liabilities.

And Jesus, right in talking about greatness and being last of all, takes a child and says, “This is who needs to be included and welcomed. This is who needs to have a seat at the table. Welcoming one like this is like welcoming me.”

Then John brings up someone casting out a demon in Jesus’s name, someone they had seen at some point, but they didn’t know his background, didn’t know his credentials. All they knew is he wasn’t one of their group, so the question behind this point seems to be, “Can we at least cut out that guy? He’s not one of us.”

Now Christ elsewhere has no qualms about drawing boundaries, even challenging ones—just read ahead to some of the topics he’ll touch on in coming weeks. (And a fair warning, some of the subject matter Jesus talks about may be especially difficult for us to understand because it hits on potentially painful and sensitive things. In particular, in the next passage which we’ll look at next week Jesus talks about divorce and remarriage, which might hit home in an especially painful way for many of us. We’ll get to that next week, but I didn’t want it to catch anyone off guard.)

But there’s a greater point here than who’s qualified and who’s not. His disciples are focused on who’s the greatest, who’s the most qualified, who’s in, and who’s out. And even among those who are in, who’s in the inner circle? And even among those in the inner circle, who’s the greatest among them? And to that he says, if you’re focused on who’s greatest or who’s qualified, you’re missing the point.

I wonder if we miss the point too. This time of year is dominated by discussion of new starts and new resolve. Start the new year with a clean slate, and maybe take an honest look at how one can improve. What do these look like, what are they called? New Years resolutions of course. Those are all well and good. Not the worst thing in the world to try to be healthier, more balanced, more motivated or focused.

But we can take it too far. Not just in New Years resolutions and all that, but in this drive to be better. You see the same thing the disciples were arguing about is too often the very thing we obsess over too, and not just who’s the greatest among Jesus’s followers—though that’s all too often the case even within the church—but who’s greatest? Who’s greater?

Can I become greater than that rival in the office or in the workplace, or than that competitor across the street, city, or state? Can I generate more business, get promoted more quickly, close more deals, put out a more appealing product or service? Can I become greater than that other student at school? Can I study more to get better grades, maybe get into this college while he doesn’t, or qualify for that scholarship or program while she doesn’t? Can I become greater than that other parent, that other family that seems to have it all together? Can I

do more with my kids? Can I get my kids to do more? Can I surpass this expectation with our home, and that expectation with our life and livelihood, and then that other expectation with all the ways people see us?

Be honest. How easy is it for a good, decent impulse to improve something about yourself to turn into something else, into improving and bettering ourselves in comparison to or at the expense or exclusion of someone else? Nothing wrong with honest self-reflection and assessment. Nothing wrong with striving for excellence in what we do in the home, workplace, or school. Let us use the gifts God has given to his glory and to the best of our ability.

But how easy is it to miss the point? How easy is it to become so consumed by this drive that it stopped becoming about improvement a long time ago? How easy is it to become more about who you're better than? And then how easy is it to become lost in the never-ending cycle of comparison and discontent?

And to that Jesus says, you want to be great? Stop trying to make yourself better. Stop trying to lift yourself up in comparison to and at the expense or exclusion of someone else. Stop turning to all these false things that you think will fulfill you or improve you or make you better.

Look at this little kid. If someone were to get excluded, this little kid is probably one of the first. Welcome this kid like you would welcome me. Look at this guy over here casting out demons in my name, but with unknown credentials and bonafides. If someone were to be looked at with suspicion, it'd be this guy. Do not stop him.

And you know what you should be focusing on? Stop worrying about who's in and who's out, who's higher and who's lower. And I know, that's going to completely turn over what your assumptions were about who you are in the home, workplace, and school, but the path to life is losing it.

You want to be great? Become last of all. It changes everything.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.