

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

An Eye-Opening Game Changer

(Mark 9:30-41)

Study #17

Introduction: “Well, THAT changes everything!”...

Much of the time, our lives are steady-state and status quo. One day is pretty much like the day before. Static. And then, out of the blue, we gain an insight that changes everything.

People who listen to Dave Ramsey learn the liberating truth that being out of debt is a really nice way to live. They wake up one morning and decide to start following the Bible’s wisdom when it comes to money. They work like crazy to pay off their loans and live debt-free. The result is financial freedom.

Or a sedentary couch potato makes the discovery that it’s a really great thing to get fit. So, slowly, but surely, he makes strength gains. She regains long-lost flexibility. Endurance increases as waist size shrinks. And having gotten fit, the FORMER couch potato never turns back.

If we are alert, a life-changing realization can dawn us at any time. The mental breakthrough can relate to health, relationships, or eating habits. It can involve investing money, caring for the environment, political thinking, or taste in music.

It can certainly happen with respect to a life with God.

You may remember the first time you actually embraced the idea that God loved you. It changed everything, didn’t it?

Or you may recall how everything changed when you realized that your standing before God is not based on how good you are, but how good God was in sending Jesus to die for you on the cross?

Today we consider the game-changing reality that the Jesus we follow is a certain kind of Messiah.

If the Jesus we follow had ruled and reigned like any other king, had He clawed His way to the top by force or by intrigue, had He lived a life of splendor and ease in the castle, we would follow in a certain way. Our following of THAT Jesus would look like a race to the top, winner take all, quest for power.

But our Jesus is not a king like any other king. The Jesus we follow is a crucified, Servant Messiah-King. And today we will see that understanding THAT, changes everything.

For some time now, as we have looked at Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has been traveling around in non-Jewish territory. Today, He and His twelve apostles roll back into the northernmost state of Palestine in the first century, and that would be the region of Galilee.

The Soon-to-Come Passion of Jesus (vv. 30-32)

Back Home in Galilee (v. 30)

[30] From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it.

Jesus and His men are now back on home turf. Galilee was and is a beautiful land of hills and rivers and green pastures.

But the highlands of Caesarea Philippi, with the backdrop of the imposing Mount Hermon - site of the Transfiguration - are visible only in the rear-view mirror.

Galilee was the area where Jesus was best known. He grew up in Nazareth and launched His public ministry in Capernaum, both cities in Galilee. It seems that most everywhere He went in Galilee He was followed by great crowds.

This time, He wants to be under the radar. He wants no notice.

If we aren't exactly sure how He intended to pull off privacy, we are at least told why He wanted that privacy.

Preview to the Passion (v. 31)

The Son of Man...

[31a] For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man...”

He is giving His twelve apostles intensive instruction about the direction His life is moving. He needs the time alone with His most committed followers to ensure that they understand.

And you'll notice that He refers to Himself here as “the Son of Man.” This is a title that an Old Testament prophet would use when referring to the Messiah in the grandest possible terms.

The Son of Man was thought of as a divine figure who would come to the earth in flaming glory. The Son of Man rules and reigns. The Son of Man is sovereign.

So you can imagine the puzzled looks on the faces of the disciples when they heard what Jesus said would happen to Him, the Son of Man.

...delivered, killed, raised

[31] For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be delivered¹ into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later.”

¹ The verb does not, in and of itself, mean “betray.” But the context forces that meaning here.

Now, He has told them all of this before (8:31), so this isn't exactly new teaching. It is a reminder. It's another attempt to drive home the message of the looming cross.

Jesus knew that to be forewarned was to be forearmed and He wanted His men to know what was going to happen before it happened.

He will be ***“delivered.”*** Read that, “betrayed.” The word doesn't have to mean *betrayed*, but it makes sense to understand it this way here. It is the same word used to describe what happened to John the Baptist. And it is exactly what will happen to Jesus. He will be betrayed by one of the twelve.²

Jesus' experience will include one “deliverance” after another. After being delivered over to the Romans and the Jewish leadership by Judas, He'll be delivered to the Sanhedrin. He'll be delivered to Pontius Pilate. He'll be delivered by Pilate to the torturers before He is nailed to the cross.

Then He, the Son of Man, will be killed. Of course, Jesus goes on here to speak of the resurrection. But “rising again” was such a foreign-sounding concept that the disciples couldn't even begin to grasp what He was talking about when He said that.

Combine the baffling concept, “*rise again*” with the jarring thought of the Son of Man suffering and dying and you've got a perfect storm of confusion in the minds of the twelve.

Apostolic Disconnect (v. 32)

[32] But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.³

Here, the disciples, who were not normally shy about speaking their minds,⁴ didn't dare voice their confusion.

² Judas Iscariot - see 3:19 for a foreshadowing of that betrayal.

³ Perhaps, as one scholar wondered, - “They understand enough to be afraid to ask to understand more.” (E. Best)

⁴ Remember Peter's rebuke of Jesus after the first prediction of His death (8:32).

That makes me wonder if they had begun to suspect that the answer they would get if they were to ask would be exactly the answer they didn't want to hear.

Actually, Jesus could not have made the message more clear. And especially from the perspective of two thousand years, it is as clear as a bell to us.

Jesus, the Son of Man, will suffer and die. His career will follow the path of servanthood and sacrifice. A crown is in the far distant future; of more immediate concern is a cross.

That is the “set up” for what we will see for the remainder of our time together today. Understanding what follows depends on grasping, embracing, accepting that the Jesus we follow was a soon-to-be-crucified Messiah.

If we don't keep His just-around-the-corner suffering and death in mind, we'll not understand a bit of what we'll see today.

That is because from this point forward Mark takes us on a journey, detailing what following THIS Jesus, this Suffering Servant Messiah Jesus, will entail.

Throat-Clearing Corrections (vv. 33-41)

With Regard to Greatness (vv. 33-37)

Walking, talking (vv. 33-34)

Jesus' question (v. 33)

Traveling south from Caesarea Philippi, Jesus and the twelve came eventually to Capernaum, the city by the Sea of Galilee from which He had launched His public ministry.

The thirteen of them made their way to Peter's home, where Jesus stayed when He was in town. As they were unwinding from the long trip, Jesus asked the guys a question.

[33] They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, “What were you discussing on the way?”

So, did Jesus not know what they were talking about the question? Oh, I think He knew.

It is not unusual for parents to ask their kids a question, even if they know full well what the answer will be. The reason they ask the question is to give the kid a chance to tell the story straight. (Teachers at school and managers at work do the same thing.)

That is what I think is going on here. I think that Jesus' question was less a request for information and more a request that the twelve “come clean” about the subject of their conversation.

He wasn't in the dark about what they were discussing. He just wanted them to own up to it.

The disciples' answer (v. 34)

[34a] But they kept silent...

Has this ever happened at your house?

Mom asks, “*What were you doing?*” Child answers, “*Nothin.*” Dad asks, “*What were you kids talking about back there?*” Kids reply, “*Nothin.*”

And sometimes, as here, a non-answer speaks volumes. The disciples didn't answer Jesus' question because they knew that they had been caught red-handed, talking about something that He wouldn't have approved of.

[34] But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest.

Hmmm... We wonder what prompted this conversation.

I read this week that there are some who think that the disciples were trying to put together a “succession plan” in light of Jesus’ telling them that He was going to be killed. Really?

I think that they were more confused about His words about dying than anything else. Nor do I see them as the forward-thinking kind who would put together a plan to continue the mission in Jesus’ absence.

No, I think that they were simply having a good ol’ verbal duel about who was Jesus’ favorite apostle? Who was the most godly?

Peter and James and John might have had the inside track, having just spent some alone time with Jesus on top of Mount Hermon. But Judas Iscariot did keep the money box. Andrew may have had bragging rights for bringing more people to Jesus than the others. Matthew could boast “most dramatic life change.”

And so the discussion went on.

And their discussion illustrates perfectly that they have not at all embraced the “Jesus Kingdom” values of servanthood and humility. They knew that these were Jesus’ values and were so embarrassed about having had the discussion that they wouldn’t even answer Jesus when He asked them to divulge what they had been talking about.

One thing is clear, though, and that is that Jesus was concerned that His disciples should get straight what greatness in His Kingdom was all about.

The disciples’ discussion (“*I’m the greatest!*” followed by, “*No, I’m the greatest!*”) could not have been more inappropriate.⁵ So, Jesus’ teaching here could not have been more timely.

LAST, the path to first (v. 35)

[35] Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”

⁵ Especially given Jesus’ just finished prediction of His own betrayal and assassination!

In Jesus’ kingdom, things don’t work the way they work in other kingdoms. In His kingdom, honor is reserved for those who practice the twin disciplines of humility and service.

That is so counter-intuitive! And yet, it is what we expect from Jesus. So much of the Christian life, as explained by Jesus, the Apostle Paul, Peter, and John is counter-intuitive that we would have been surprised to read anything else here.

- Do you want to live? You must die to yourself.
- Do you want great reward? Learn to give.
- Do you want to lead? Become a servant.

And if you want to be great, if you want to be first, rush to the end of the line and work hard at being last.

Within Jesus’ kingdom values are turned upside down. And the process of orienting to His values comes through the example of a child.

Exhibit A: A child (vv. 36-37)

[36] Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms...

Now, they are inside Peter’s home when this conversation takes place, so I think it’s likely that the child is one of Peter’s relatives. (Not that it matters all that much.)

Jesus is clearly using this child to make a point, but WHAT point? In the next chapter He will have something to say about one of the more winsome characteristics of children. But that’s not the point here.

He’s got this small child in His arms. We can see the child’s weakness and smallness - and THAT is the point. The point is that in that society as in our own, while children are cherished, they are powerless.

Children are dependent in the extreme. They aren’t big enough to work. They are under the authority of someone else - everyone else! They have no power of self-determination.

Listen to what Jesus goes on to say while holding this child in His arms.

[36] Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, [37] “Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.”

Jesus was putting Himself on equal footing with a child, the least highly regarded member of society.

The disciples are all hot and bothered about being “great” and “first.” Jesus, their Leader, says that He claims the status of a child, right at the bottom of the heap.

The disciples didn’t fully embrace this reality until later. But we need to get it today.

The key to being first in Jesus’ kingdom is to intentionally choose to be last. Rush to the end of the line. Fight over who gets to serve. Consider the needs of others more important than your own.

The community of those who follow Jesus is to be marked by servanthood and humility, because that is what marked Jesus.

And there is another apostolic misconception Jesus had to clear up. It comes to light immediately after the first confusion.

John speaks up with a concern, and he speaking up doesn’t exactly distinguish himself, either.

With Regard to Clique-ishness (vv. 38-41)

“Us” vs “Them” (v. 38)

[38] John said to Him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name,⁶ and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us.”

⁶ Contemporary sources cite examples of exorcisms. See Acts 19:13-16.

Well, isn’t this awkward.

Here is some unknown exorcist, successful at doing what the disciples (at least the nine who didn’t go with Jesus up the Mount of Transfiguration) could not do. He is casting out demons in the Name of Jesus.

No doubt watching this guy at work would have been tough on apostolic egos. But, this exorcist was not, as John put it, ***“following US.”***

You catch the “us” vs “them” terminology. It’s impossible to miss it. Jesus caught it, too and had something to say about it.

Jesus’ inclusiveness (vv. 39-40)

[39] But Jesus said, “Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. [40] “For he who is not against us is for us.”⁷

Jesus says to John, *“Chill.”*

John needed to recognize that someone who is casting out demons in the Name of Jesus is no enemy. Let him be. Cheer him on!

Something wonderful is going on when demons are cast out of someone by the powerful Name of Jesus. Yet far from rejoicing over people being set free, John is “concerned” because this exorcist is not in their group.

John’s perspective was, *“Just us twelve; the rest we’ll shelve.”* But that can quickly become, *“All righty then, just us ten.”* And that will morph into, *“Just us eight, well that’ll be great.”* Next, it’s, *“Just us four, and no more.”* And we wind up with, *“Just us two - and I’m not so sure about you.”*

John has fallen victim to the trap of the clique.

⁷ Compare to Matthew 12:30 - ***“He who is not with Me is against Me.”***

It's the idea that if someone is not a member of my group, doesn't see things my way, doesn't do things the way I do them, well, there must be something wrong with him or her.

Jesus' answer to John's concern shows a far more expansive, far more inclusive mindset. Yes, of course the Lord was investing His energies into the training of the twelve. But there was room for others to follow, too.

And there is something for us, here, too.

Our church is surrounded by dozens of other churches here in Northwest San Antonio. (Two others right here at the intersection of Guilbeau and Tezel!)

Some of these other churches do things differently than we do them. Their music is really, really loud, or it's way more traditional, or it's sung *a capella*.

Some of these churches are much bigger than we are and some are much smaller. Some are distinct from us in terms of baptism or communion or denominational affiliation.

Fine. Do they do what they do in the Name of Jesus? Do they preach and teach "Faith alone in Christ alone"? They do? Then let's cheer 'em on!

Clique-ishness is a symptom of moving "off-mission" - and the best illustration of that I've ever had was when Todd Havekost and I traveled to Russia in 1999 on a short-term missions trip.

While we were there, the association of evangelical churches held a meeting of many of churches in Tatarstan at the church in Nizhnekamsk. At this meeting, there was a lot of bickering and arguing going on.

The scene was being explained to us second-hand through our translators, but it was clearly not an edifying scene.

At the height of the argument, one older gentleman stood up and said to the rest, "*Brothers, why are we fighting among ourselves like this? Remember just a few years ago when the communists were in control we were united in Jesus. We were all living and dying for Jesus and the secondary matters weren't important. Now we run the risk of the secondary matters becoming primary because we've forgotten that we are one in Jesus.*"

The spirit of the Apostle John's clique mentality is an ever-present temptation. So let's remember that we - all of the "we" who have trusted in Jesus! - are united in Him. Let's rejoice in others' progress and be as inclusive and expansive as Jesus was here with the unnamed exorcist!⁸

I mean, for a picture of how expansive and how generous, gracious and giving God is, Jesus makes the following promise?

God's expansive heart (v. 41)

[41] "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward."

Conclusion:

One day, Jesus will rule over all as the King of kings and the Lord of lords He truly is. But today, we are called to follow a Servant King.

And following a Servant King means that we race to the end of the line AND that we exult in the victories of others who, like we do, serve Jesus, even if they don't serve Jesus like we do.

⁸ For a story in the Old Testament with a similar theme, see Numbers 11:26-29 and the story of Eldad and Medad. God has always had an expansive, inclusive heart.