

The Greatest

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[0 : 00] If you'll turn back with me to Mark's Gospel Chapter 9, an ongoing study of this Gospel. Those who have been here for most of the series will know that there's a theme throughout Mark's Gospel which is portraying Jesus sometimes in ways that we wouldn't expect or to break some of our own misconceptions about who Jesus is and at the same time it's like a mirror revealing what we are like before God and that comes across again very clearly in this chapter.

When I was a young guy and I went to church and especially when I went to missionary meetings we used to have a bit of a laugh some of my friends which kind of highlighted the sad kind of individuals that we were but we kind of would have an informal sweepstake at a missionary meeting to see how soon a missionary would say that the land that they were working in was a land of contrasts.

It used to be this stock phrase that either missionaries or people who'd been out on the mission field or people who'd visited the mission field would come back. This country is a land of contrasts and it was bingo every time, sorry for the language I'm using it's not very good though, but it would be quite chuffed you know if early on quite early on when the mission, unsuspecting would say this was a land of contrasts and it was always kind of sad and funny for someone like me.

You know you get an insight into the kind of guy I was, kind of things that you know I spent my time doing. But after all these years here I am just about a half century and I'm going to say this chapter is a chapter of contrasts.

So there you go I've finally become what I mimicked in my youth. This is very much a book, a chapter of contrasts and it's a great, there's real, real contrasts going on in this chapter and I hope that we'll look at some of them today.

[2 : 18] Particularly obviously with Christ and with Christ in himself, there are different contrasts unfolded and also with Christ and his people and there's also contrasts with people with levels of faith and unbelief.

So it's a fantastic chapter of opposites in many ways and we're going to look at some of them for a few moments this morning. And it's always a mirror for us into our own needs and into our own need for redemption and also to point us towards Jesus Christ whom we worship and also as we seek to serve him.

But the first contrast that I want to highlight from this chapter is between the transfiguration of Jesus and Calvary, the crucifixion of Jesus.

In the early part of this chapter, Ross read about the transfiguration where Jesus takes three of his closest friends and they go up onto this mountain top and Jesus is as if the kind of, the veil is pulled back.

You have, I've got that picture of your Superman when Superman's in his ordinary clothes and then he pulls back his shirt and he's kind of got a Superman thing underneath. Now that's a very, a trite picture I know, I don't mean it to be, but it's almost as if with Jesus the veil is pulled back on his humanity and his glory and his majesty and his kingship and his goodness spills out, dazzling before them and there's two great Old Testament characters appears with them on that mountain top experience.

[4 : 05] Now we know that the mountain top experiences are important in the Bible. There's a lot of significant things that happen on the tops of mountains in Bible and it's whether it's Sinai or Horeb or here or even Calvary.

And it's an amazing picture, this transfiguration of Jesus. Given to the disciples, Peter mentions it in his letter, second Peter, he says we are eyewitnesses of Jesus' glory when we saw him on the mountain in his majesty and in his honor and in his glory.

So there's this, it's like they're given a glimpse of who Jesus is, really is. He's hidden that, he's come and he's humiliated and he's come as a human being, he's come in our place and it's as if his majesty and his glory in many ways is hidden.

Certainly the physical, tangible glory is hidden, just looks like everyone else. And yet here it is being God, it kind of spills out and God himself, God the Father speaks, this is my son who my love listened to him.

And that's a superb picture of Jesus, one that sometimes we forget. But it's in a contrast sandwich because in the chapter before we have the first indication or prophecy of Jesus' death at Calvary, remember we looked at that last week, he predicted his death crucifixion.

[5 : 41] And then afterwards in this passage also we have Jesus telling them that he is going to go to Calvary, it's in verse 30 forward, and he's going to die and the hands of men and kill him in three days rise again.

So we've got this sandwich, we've got the transfiguration of Jesus and on either side of it we've got reference to the crucifixion, hugely contrasting events.

And these are remarkably linked but also remarkably different. So you've got the King of Kings and the King of Kings, majestic God is shortly to be nailed to a cross for the sins of his people.

And there's great parallels but great contrast between these two events. Jesus' transfiguration is a private, at least at this point, it's a private event, it becomes public because it's inscripturated. But it's a private event between Jesus and one or two of his friends. Calvary is hugely public, everyone sees Jesus on the cross.

[7 : 01] Not many see his glory but lots of people see his crucifixion, it's a humiliatingly public event. Jesus here on the mountain has this glorious unexpected apparel which is beautiful and wonderful and glorious and in white.

And on the cross he's naked. He's ripped of his clothes, they divide, they take his clothes and they gamble for them.

Outer and his inner garments, naked on the cross, utterly, completely humiliated. The Son of God naked before a watching and derisory world.

He appears here on the mountain with two prophets on either side or at least people representing maybe the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, Moses and Elijah. And the amazing kind of, as Mark always makes that link between the Old Testament right forward through and to what Jesus has done.

And across he's flanked by two thieves. Three disciples here share his glory.

[8 : 20] Three women, disciples, watch his suffering. There's parallels and there's differences. Here God speaks and declares, this is my Son, whom I love.

At Calvary, heaven's silent, but a Roman soldier declares, this is surely, this is the Son of God. And so you've got this amazing contrast and amazing parallels between Jesus transfigured and Jesus on the cross.

And the reminder is that Jesus isn't kind of our made up religious icon. This guy who's a good person who ended up maybe being misunderstood and being crucified in the cross.

Here is the unique Savior who is both God and both man, who is glorified and glorious and amazing and to be worshiped, but is also able and willing and loving enough to empty himself of all of this in order to be a redeemer and our Savior, to go to these horrific lengths of ignominy and shame and nakedness and brutality and the facing of hell and the grave and death in order to be our Savior. Great love, great cost. And there's just a glimpse here of the contrast. Sometimes between who we think Jesus is and who he really is, the Jesus we find easy to ignore, easy to reject, easy to disobey, easy to just marginalise and yet who he is.

[9 : 58] Oh yeah, we can take the Jesus on the cross. We love that picture because somehow we stand over it. But the transfigured Christ is glorified revelation of himself as God is a reminder to us who Jesus is.

So this contrast between transfiguration and Calvary, but there's also a much more earthly contrast in this chapter between faith and unbelief.

There's a lot about faith in this chapter and a lot about unbelief. And it's quite interesting, you could look at it at many different angles, different levels, but I'm just going to quickly look at the differences between the disciples and the anonymous guy who's not mentioned who is casting out demons in Jesus' name.

Teacher, verse 38, John says, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop because he wasn't one of us. Jesus said, don't stop him.

So here's a guy that nobody really knows about anything about him, but he was working and serving in Jesus' name and he was casting out demons. The disciples were miffed. They were hurt that this guy was doing it.

[11 : 08] He wasn't one of them. And so they said to Jesus, look, stop him doing it. This guy had faith. Jesus said, those who are not against us are for us. And that's contrasted with the tragic failure of the disciples themselves.

It's amazing that they would say that in many ways, but it's amazing that they would say it in the light of their own failure to cast out demons earlier on in this chapter, The Healing of the Boy with the Evil Spirit, and they have one belief.

And it's Jesus who's the judge. And Jesus is the one who's in control of the situation. Jesus tells him why they failed. Jesus tells him not to stand against this guy who has got faith and he's the one who is the judge.

And he's telling the disciples, he's not telling the disciples when he says, you know, he is not against us as for us. He's not saying just accept everyone who says anything in Jesus' name, but he's saying of the disciples, listen, don't be so exclusivist.

Don't be so judgmental. But look at your own motives first. And look at your own failures first, because they had failed hugely to act in faith in the previous situation.

[12 : 25] And so you've got faith, trust in Jesus, and you've got unbelief. But you've also got contrasting unbelief. You've got the unbelief of the disciples in the story of The Healing of the Boy with the Evil Spirit, and the unbelief of the Father in the situation.

I'm going to come back to this variously during this sermon. It's a really sad story. It's a really reflective story, and it's also a very helpful story.

The disciples who went with Jesus were at the bottom of this mountain, where the transfiguration was happening, and a man came up to them, and his son was ill. He was demon possessed. He wanted healing, and they thought they could do it. They'd been given authority to do this. They were Jesus' disciples. They were full of themselves.

They were proud. They had techniques that they thought they could employ to heal this poor boy of his possession. Yet they were failed completely.

[13 : 29] And Jesus, when he speaks to them, saying, you failed because you were prayerless. You weren't in a relationship with God. You just were resting on your laurels.

It's not about your faith. It's about understanding God's power and being dependent on God through this. And that word, Jesus, was hugely frustrating.

They just were relying on themselves and what they thought they could do in their own strength, and what they thought they'd been given to do, but they didn't realize that they had to do.

Jesus were independence on Jesus. In relationship with Jesus, in prayerful reliance on God to do these things.

Now, the Father's unbelief is different. He's come. He's come in need. And he's looking for Jesus to help him.

[14 : 26] And Jesus isn't there. The disciples can't do it. And then Jesus comes onto the scene. And he almost, as a last resort, speaks to Jesus and says, look, if you could do it, it would be great.

And he doesn't really have much. There's not a great deal of confidence in that request, is there? And Jesus gently rebukes him, if you can, Jesus says.

Everything is possible for him who believes in that. And immediately perks him up and he says, well, I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief. And so there's a difference, isn't there?

There's a contrast between the two unbeliefs here. The disciples' unbelief is kind of a bit proud and a bit arrogant and a bit self-reliant. The Father's unbelief is despairing and is wanting to be different and is looking to Jesus Christ to give him more faith and more belief.

And that picture of contrast and the focus on the answer coming in prayer and the relationship with God is a great lesson to us about our own faith. A lot of people talk about faith and levels of faith and how much faith or how little faith we've gone through.

[15 : 41] Oh, I wish I'd more faith. I would like to have more faith in my life or various things along these lines. But the key for us is to be in relationship with God, to be prayerful and to know Him and to know Him better.

And the more we know Him, the more our faith will be strengthened because we will see Him as He is. And it's not really about as if it's some kind of thermometer level of faith that we have or don't have.

It's simply that we're asked to be in relationship with Him and leave the rest to him as it were.

There's a great quote from one of the commentaries by a guy called David Garland that I've been using for Mark's Gospel.

And he said, one cannot get ready for the moment by quickly uttering a special prayer. One has to be ready through a prayer life when the moment comes.

So you see the difference? It's not that we're living our lives and then some difficulty or trial or question of faith comes up and we say, well, I better pray about that so I've got more faith to take me through it.

[16:51] He's not saying that we apply for special kind of raising of the level of our faith levels by praying just before the crisis. He says that we should be ready for the crisis or the moment through having an ongoing relationship, prayer life with the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's a hugely significant thing, contrasting faith and unbelief. But there's also a contrast here between the greatest and the least, isn't there?

In verses 33 to 36. The disciples are astonishing in this chapter. And I can say that because I'm a disciple and the same issues that they have, I have.

If you take this chapter, if you could use the illustration of it being like a boxing match just to change the picture. And at the end of each round of a boxing match, the score is totted up for one boxer or another.

Well, can I say that this chapter, the score for the disciples is really bad. A lot of negative things are totted up in this chapter for the disciples.

[18:12] It's not a good chapter for them. It's a poor one for them. They're arguing, they're self-centered, they're proud, they're not prayerful, they're not listening, they're judgmental.

And it comes across even here, even after all they've been doing, what Jesus has been saying about his death and not being able to heal the boy with the evil spirit. And they're walking towards Capernaum and there are a couple of steps behind Jesus and they're arguing about which of them is the greatest.

They still haven't got it, have they? They're arguing about Jesus being this Messiah and entering into his kingdom and it would be a physical kingdom.

They were looking at the feet of the Roman people and they wanted to see which of them was the greatest so they could be his right hand man, his prime minister or his treasurer or something like that. And they misunderstood everything about Jesus and they just didn't get it.

They were arguing about who was the greatest. So Jesus with this visual picture takes a little child and he stands among them and taking the child in his arms and says whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.

[19:22] And he's making a point here about who's the greatest and who's the least and what is greatness in the kingdom of God. And he takes a child, a picture, he takes a child.

Now he doesn't take the child because the child is necessarily innocent or obedient or hungry for knowledge.

I think here what he's taking the child is because in the society in which Jesus was the child was really powerless. The child had no status.

The child was a nobody. Child had no rights. The child was vulnerable. The child was under authority. And it's a picture that he's giving, he's saying this is what it means to be the greatest.

Is to be willing to deny yourself. It's going back to the previous chapter, to last week really, what we were looking at there, to recognize that in and of our rights, in and of ourselves we deny our rights and we follow Jesus.

[20:26] And we make ourselves vulnerable and we don't follow the movement of the world towards influence and power and status and rights but we give them up in order to follow Jesus.

Now Jesus shows that way himself. We've seen the sign which haven't we? We've seen his glory and he's saying that because that's what he gives up.

Made himself Philippians 2 nothing. Emptied himself. Denied his rights at any point and across. He could have withdrawn his hand from the nail and flicked his finger and brought the angels down to

rescue him.

Denied that right. He denied the right to leave us lost, justly condemned, separated from him because of our sin. He denies that rights.

He becomes vulnerable. He becomes a servant. He shows that later on again in the upper room where he washes the disciples feet. The most menial, doesn't mean much to us in our culture, hugely significant in his culture for the master to strip off his outer clothing and get on his knees and wash the visitor's feet.

[21 : 46] The lowest of servants would do that and it's his reminder to us that that is the way of the cross. The greatness for us as Christians is in serving.

It's in giving. It's completely counter-cultural and counter-intuitive that we are greatest in God's eyes.

We are most like Jesus when we are denying our rights and where we are serving and when we are giving to others. And that is the glory of what Jesus presents to us here.

So we have an amazing contrast, a chapter of contrast and in somebody you've got that contrast between Jesus and the disciples. And when I speak about the disciples, I apply that to myself and to ourselves today.

You know, disciples are very like us, aren't they? It's a mirror into what we are like. They didn't understand. You know, Peter didn't understand.

[22 : 52] When he was on the mountaintop experience, what did he do? When he saw Jesus, it was a kind of scary experience because he'd never seen Jesus like that before.

He's been with him for a long time and he knew who he was and he acknowledged who Jesus was but I don't think he truly understood. And then it was all revealed on the mountaintop.

And what did Peter want to do? Can we just make sort of tents here and just stay like this forever? Can you just stay here? You know, he doesn't really know what he's saying.

He didn't know what to say. So if frightened were told in this passage, these shelters, something to keep this moment alive and so often we're like that spiritually, something amazing happens, something great spiritually and we just want to freeze the moment.

We want it always to be like that. We want always to be on a spiritual high and a mountaintop. We always want to be buzzing spiritually but then we come down and we realise it's not just quite like that.

[24 : 00] We just want good times spiritually, times when we understand our faith is great, we can see clearly and we understand who Jesus is and it's almost like we're floating.

But Jesus reminds us and it's a sharp and a stark reminder as he comes down from the mountain, bang, he comes into a quarreling, squabbling people, disciples who aren't living by faith, arguing with others and frustrating him hugely.

And it's very often a picture, isn't it, of the church. I think it's a great picture, a tragic picture, but a great picture.

And they came, verse 14, to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers were arguing with them as soon as they saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and rank to greet him.

There may have been some residual evidence of Jesus' glory as they were overwhelmed to see him. But Jesus comes down and there's, what does he see?

[25 : 03] He sees something I've mentioned to you before. He just sees their backs and their shoulders because they're all in facing each other. There's a few fists going up every so often arguing, arguing with the teachers of the law, scribes, the disciples.

Why couldn't you do this? Do you know your Bible? Look at page 57. Why couldn't you under, and there's this argument going on. And there's a crowd looking on in a kind of amazement and in the middle of the crowd there's some poor broken father who's been ignored because they're arguing about fine points of theology.

And they've been ignored in his brokenness and in his loss. And isn't that so often been the picture of the church? People come, people come to the church.

What they perceive as the church to Jesus to get help from him. And the church, all they see is our backs. Because we're insular and looking in and arguing with one another about theological stuff.

And we're not looking out for the broken and the lost and those who need and healed. We're obsessed with ourselves. You know, the poor father in verse 17 says, I brought you my son.

[26 : 20] It says to Jesus, I brought you my son. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit but they could not. I brought you my son.

The reality is that it is Jesus that people need to see in our lives. And the healing of Jesus spiritually and the power of Jesus in our lives.

Didn't understand. Disciples thought they were special. They were better than others. They had special access to Jesus. We are part of Jesus in our sanctum.

You got that ability but they misunderstood the cross, didn't they? They weren't listening to what Jesus was saying about this prophetic message of the cross.

They were rejecting servanthood. They were wanting to be the greatest. They wanted to be defined by being part of Jesus in crowd. They were unaware of the seriousness of sin in their own lives.

[27 : 25] Jesus goes on to give that really scathing passage about the seriousness of sin. Now, it is illustrative. He is not literally telling us to cut off our eye and arm and our leg.

He is using metaphorical language to say it is really serious. If you have got sin in your life, he says, get rid of it. The disciples hadn't understood that.

They were proud and self-reliant. They were unsure about what it meant to follow Jesus and the cost and the self-denial. That is a challenge for us as well, isn't it?

We often just rub the back of sin in our lives. We allow it, we caress it. We take it, we think it is part of us.

So much part of us we can't without radical surgery, get rid of it. So we just live with it. It is just what I am. It is what I am made of. You know, it is my makeup. God made me like this. But Jesus says, no, take that.

[28 : 26] Get rid of that. Deal with it. Because then you will understand my grace, my transforming power and my love. I started reading last night a little book that someone gave us in the house, which I think everyone should read.

I think it is called The Art of Self-Forgetfulness. The art of book title, forgetfulness as well.

And it is just a very thin book with big letters. I like it. Big words, big writing, small thin book, easy to read. You can only take an evening to read it.

And reading that book genuinely made me wonder if I had even started walking the Christian road because of speaking from a passage in Corinthians about the beauty of self-forgetfulness, of being reliant and finding our identity in Jesus, not being too concerned about what other people think about us, not in a balshy kind of careless way, but because we are more concerned what Jesus thinks about us.

And not even concerned what we think about ourselves. And that was the big arrow to my heart.

And it is a reminder to us, it was a reminder to me that we never move beyond learning and growing and developing as Christians.

[29 : 55] We should never get to a stage where we think, well, I understand things. I think it is quite a good thing to think, I've hardly started this road because it brings us back to Jesus, the whole idea of servanthood, the whole idea of just forgetting ourselves and loving and relying on and finding our identity and our wholeness and our image in Christ.

It is written by Tim Keller and it is kind of written against the whole, or written in response to the whole need to be self-affirming and things like that, of high self-esteem as opposed to low self-esteem.

He says we find our esteem in Christ. Fantastic. Very easy to read. So you've got the disciples, then you've got Jesus. Jesus gloriously divine with authority over life and over death and over the grave, revealing his sacrificial love in stages to these people who don't understand it.

Receiving the divine pleasure of his father in the transfiguration, frustrated as he comes down the mountain by the blindness of his disciples, angry at sin and its effects because he sees what it does just like a parent, just like someone who loves someone else, angry when they see the effects of sin in the life of another.

And then that complete sacrifice, sacrificial dependence on him because he provides all we need, the Spirit of God, the forgiveness, the newness, the transformation, the love, the hope and the future.

[31 : 49] So what's the challenge for this as we look at this contrast, as we think about Jesus and we think about ourselves, as we think about our discipleship and whether it mirrors more of the discipleship of the disciples here than anything else.

What's the challenge? Well, can I just leave you with the challenge that God, the Father, gives to the disciples in verse 7, where he says, this is my Son who my love, listen to him, listen to him. That's the challenge that I leave. On Wednesday night at Eaton Preah, we've been looking at the last number of Eaton Preahs and we've been looking at different aspects of prayer. This time we're looking at listening to God as part of prayer.

And Billy will lead that on Wednesday evening, listen to prayer. And isn't it interesting? Here we have Jesus at the most visual, the greatest visual representation of his divinity that we have in the Transfiguration.

Absolutely clear. You know, it's a visual reality for the disciples to see, to encourage them, to make them think who Jesus is. And what does God say?

[33 : 06] He doesn't say, look at him. I think that's interesting for all of us. He doesn't say to the disciples, just look at him, that'll help you.

He says, no, listen to him. It might be the most visual representation of God in his glory, God the Son, but God the Father still says, listen to him, listen, listen to what he says in his Word.

You know, that he is the Word incarnate. His Word is given to us to listen, to listen to what he says, to hear his diagnosis of our own need, to hear his remedy, to see his remedy, to listen to his voice of love saying, I love you.

I transform you, I want to forgive you, I want to redeem you, I want to buy you back. Listen to all the privileges that he gives, the promises he makes, hear what he says about sin and their responsibility, and what he says about the future.

Hear future in mind. Some of our future is not that long here. Eternal life beckons.

[34 : 12] What does he say about our priorities? What does he say about who's the greatest? Are we listening to him? Are we molding our lives to him? Are we changing? Are we responding? We're not just for the hour we're here, but in our lives are we those people who by faith are living this prayer life so when the moment comes, faith will work itself out.

And the moment comes. Not living our lives, and then when the moment comes in a panic, in a blind panic, we press the emergency prayer button and hope that God will help us.

That our lives are lives of relationship with Jesus Christ and prayerful dependence, our faith is growing. So when the moment comes, our faith is ready.

May that be the case for me and for all of us that we are listening to him. Listening to Jesus. God bless you, the intercessor.

Amen. Amen.

[35 : 33] Amen.