

"Lord God, You have appointed me as a bishop and pastor in Your Church, but You see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked Your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word. Use me as Your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all."

"Sir, we would see Jesus."

JESUS' DISCIPLES ARGUE ABOUT GREATNESS

Gospel – Mark 9

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know this, ³¹because he was teaching his disciples. He told them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him. But three days after he is killed, he will rise."

³²But they did not understand the statement and were afraid to ask him about it.

³³They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they remained silent, because on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and placed him in their midst. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes not just me but also him who sent me."

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Do we know what makes us joyful? There's a difference between happiness and joy. Being happy comes and goes. Being joyful is steady and constant when things in life turn bad. Some people scrape and push over the happy, but today we're going to talk about being joyful.

How do you spell JOY? We grew up with this song, "J-O-Y, J-O-Y, this is what it means. Jesus first, yourself last, and others in between." Jesus first, yourself last, others in between – this remarkably spells the word "JOY," and clearly follows what God has to tell us in the sermon text today.

Jesus First, Yourself Last, Others In Between

I need you to understand, to start out, that Jesus only comes first when the other two are in order. Yourself must be last and others must be in between. Without that, Jesus wouldn't come first in your life. Ironically, even though yourself comes last, it gives you the greatest JOY imaginable. Let me show you what I mean.

1. Yourself last

Jesus wanted to prepare the disciples as carefully as possible for the end. His ministry was not going to last forever. It wouldn't end on the battlefield or on a throne. It would end, as Jesus told them, with a betrayal; with His bloody, undeserved death; and with new eternal life. It happens to be the second article of our creed. This was only the second time chronologically that Jesus has chosen to teach His disciples these things. The first time, you'll remember, St. Peter was furiously against this whole idea of Jesus' cross and suffering. For that, Jesus called Peter "Satan." Now Jesus was repeating the plan.

He was now not stressing the inevitability, but the nearness, of God's kingdom. The time was now short. His life would end young. The cross was near. However, Jesus had now given them new information. That new information was the betrayal. Jesus had not yet spoken of how a nearby

friendship would end in His death. He didn't yet name Judas Iscariot as the betrayer, but the prediction was out there for all to hear.

So with that information, the disciples became afraid. They also became a little mixed up. It was confusing. They weren't given the Holy Spirit yet to understand it. How would this serve the kingdom? What kind of rabbi were they now following? Was He a lunatic? Did He actually want this to happen? So they clammed up, possibly unsure if He would scold a questioner. They simply followed.

But that following must have been just too idle, and these friends of Jesus became the devil's workshop. They started arguing, of all things, about who was the greatest. What a thing to dispute now, of all times, when Jesus just told them how dark the end was! His death was near at hand, and someone close to Him would betray Him. Now they decide to argue about who was the greatest?

In the kingdom of God there are no such distinctions as we find in civic and worldly affairs, in sports or politics, in competition or advertising. Pride and love of glory are ignorant of God's kingdom.

- Peter would later say, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:5-6)

But the dispute continues in those who call themselves followers and friends of our Savior. Many preachers still think Jesus came for life hacks, D-I-Y spirituality, or for humanitarian aid. They figure their job is preach the social gospel of grand social activity. And indeed Jesus had developed a grand social activity by means of many miraculous cures, by raising the dead, by casting out devils, by calling sinners to Him. Yet despite what many people may say, this was not the main activity of Jesus. The grand social activity of Jesus is not the heart and center of the Gospel. Jesus' main activity was His betrayal, His cross, His death, and His resurrection to life. His passion and death for the salvation of sinners became the highest Gospel, the culmination and center activity of Jesus.

Only this Gospel can give us the greatest JOY, because it sheds the ideas we want to put on Him and takes on what Jesus teaches of primary importance. Jesus wanted to be LAST PLACE. It would be awful for those who believe in Him to want anything higher, as awful as arguing about greatness just after you heard Jesus say He would be betrayed.

2. Others in between

In the meantime, when Jesus was going off to do all these things, He would not be leaving them really. He would be present when they welcomed others. Welcome what? dignitaries? kings? princes? No, Jesus says to welcome such a one as a child.

Here Jesus did a reverse-children's-message. He embraced a child, and then He placed the child before them. *"Whoever welcomes one of these little children welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the Father who sent me."* Jesus was not suffering an identity crisis. He was teaching. He was painting the point of the matter. They must treat even the small as important.

Who was this child? Was it St. Ignatius, the disciple of John, as tradition later says? Was it a child of Peter or Andrew or someone from that home? Was it some other child? In point of fact, it doesn't matter who this child was. It doesn't even matter that it was a child, since Jesus said "*such a one as a child.*" Yes, children are important in God's kingdom. Yes, welcoming and caring for them is vital. But it's the quality of being small, unwise, inexperienced, and weak that Jesus was emphasizing. A child-like spirit is highly valued in God's kingdom. When an adult or any believer becomes like one such as this child – small, unwise, inexperienced, and weak – there is God's kingdom, and there is JOY.

When a deep thinker considers himself foolish, there is Jesus' kingdom, and there is JOY. When a strongman competition winner considers himself weak, there is Jesus' kingdom, and there is JOY. When person of large stature or great reputation considers herself small, there is God's kingdom, and there is JOY. When we do not consider ourselves as highly as we used to, there is God's kingdom, and there is JOY. When a sinner realizes through the Law how much of a sinner she is, there is God's kingdom, and there is JOY. When a believer understands God's undeserved love, His grace, excludes all our prior abilities and actions, there is God's kingdom, and there is JOY.

In medieval times, tales of King Arthur became more and more fanciful. Based on a common theme in paintings of King Arthur, authors began elaborating on how his table was round. This way, none of the famous knights of the round table were any better than each other, including the king. Each had the same vantage point; no head, no foot, no corner of the table to demote someone's value.

This is the way it is in the kingdom of God. The table in the kingdom of God is proverbially round. No head, no foot, no corner in God's kingdom is there to demote the value of a son or daughter. However, God's kingdom is a table that is lower and deeper. "*Whoever wants to be first must become last and the servant of all,*" Jesus said. It's too great of a position in God's kingdom to demand equality. Each servant of God views others as better. Each servant of God seeks to become less. The argument must go along the lines of "reasons I am a greater sinner than you." In our mind's eye, we know our sins and are worse than anyone sitting around us. None of us likes to let St. Paul off with the notion that he is the chief of sinners. We know our own sins only too well. We know how we have elevated the kingdom of this world, how we have stomped on others to climb the ladder and get ahead, and how we have been a poor example for others. We weary of compliments and accolades. We seek last place through putting others before ourselves.

In arranging things this way, God comes to us with His glory and power hidden. He doesn't come to us in strength or might. He doesn't come in glory.

- God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (1 Corinthians 1:27)

He comes to us in things that seem foolish and things that seem weak. He comes to us in simple things like water and the Word. He comes to us in bread and wine. It's always been this way. He didn't show Himself to Moses in His full glory. Moses was only allowed to see God's back as God passed by Him on the cleft of the rock. God was hidden.

Now Jesus was going away ... telling the disciples He was hiding in their actions towards those who would become like a child. Welcome someone small, not someone great, like during their argument; and they were really welcoming Jesus Christ.

Being small, unwise, inexperienced, and weak really puts us in a great position. We have no choice but to look to Jesus Christ, and now our lives are hidden with Christ in God. To truly become last place, we ask God to look upon Jesus instead of on us. He covers us with His forgiveness. His covenant of blood is on us. He has shed what we should have shed, but now we are hidden in His perfect suffering. We hide our sinful selves in His deeds of holiness and righteousness. We hide our wrongdoings and crimes in His wounds and cross. If only God would not look on us, we might have a right standing before Him. If only God would look on Jesus first, we could be last, and others in between, and everything would go in the right order. And graciously, God does so! He welcomes us at just the right time, while we were still sinners. Because Jesus knew what was right, did what was right, loved what was right, and was right for us; we have peace with God. Through our Lord Jesus Christ we have gained welcome access by faith into this grace in which we now stand (Rom. 5:2).

This is our attitude when we pray when we say, "Thy kingdom come." "God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and live a

godly life now on earth and forever in heaven.” How are we going to believe His Word when we are focused on ourselves and how great we might be? How are we going to go to heaven if we think it’s because we’ve on the whole been pretty good? How are we trusting in God’s grace if who we are has anything to say about it? How will we really find JOY if our lives of mistakes, wrongdoings, and crimes against God are our legacy? No, we must be last. Jesus first, yourself last, others in between.

In arranging things this way, “yourself last, others in between,” Jesus comes first. This is upper level, top-notch, first place thinking in God’s kingdom. This is JOY. After all, He put Himself last, and it gave Him JOY. That’s right. In only a few places does the Bible talk about Jesus having JOY. JOY was why He went to the cross and endured its pain – it was for the JOY set before Him. Selflessly saving us weak, unwise, inexperienced, small, hopeless and lost ones – that is where Jesus finds JOY.

Amen.