

Upside-Down Glory

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[0 : 00] Now, let's turn to our reading for this evening. We're going to be reading Mark chapter 9, verses 30 to 50. Mark chapter 9, verses 30 to 50. We're continuing to look at this section of Mark that contains Jesus' teaching around his predictions.

His first one came at the end of chapter 8, and now we read the second one. And Jesus is making clear that his path is the path to the cross, and following him will look similar.

So let's read what Mark says here about living that cross-shaped life. Mark 9, verses 30 to 50. They went on from there and passed through Galilee, and he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him.

And when he is killed, after three days he will rise. But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. And they came to Capernaum.

And when he was in the house, he asked them, What were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

[1 : 23] And he sat down and called the twelve, and he said to them, If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all. And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.

And whoever receives me, receives not me, but him 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 mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us.

For truly I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell to the unquenchable fire.

[2 : 46] And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet 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 with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.

Amen. This is God's word. Please do open again to Mark chapter 9 in your Bibles. At the equator, there are a few opportunists who for a small fee will delight to show you that the water flows in different directions depending on what side you're on.

It seems strange to look at something the opposite of what you're used to. It seems upside down or back to front. Or if you've ever driven in another country, then it's all in reverse.

[4 : 08] You drive on the opposite side, in the opposite seat. And I'm sure whoever has done it knows that familiar feeling of reaching out with your left hand only to hit the door. However, it seems upside down or back to front.

Now, what Jesus is talking about throughout this section of Mark that we're focusing on these weeks ahead is a picture of glory and is a path to glory that seems upside down or back to front.

It looks like the opposite of what we expect. This section of Mark from the end of chapter 8 through to chapter 10 is punctuated by the predictions of Jesus' death.

And we saw last week that the teaching that follows the first prediction that as sure as Jesus must suffer, so must his followers walk the same path.

And in these chapters, Mark focuses on the necessity of the cross both for Jesus and for his followers. The end of chapter 8 with the first prediction Jesus makes. The disciples couldn't understand that Jesus must die.

[5 : 16] Peter rebukes him about it. This isn't the kind of Messiah that they were expecting or waiting for. Where was the glorious overthrowing in might of their oppressive rulers?

Where was the might at all? How can death be the climax of the arrival of the great and promised king who has come to rescue? But then Jesus goes on to say in chapter 8 verse 34, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Follow me on that path. Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses it for my sake will save it. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his soul?

Jesus is clear. His path is the path to the cross. That's a certainty. But his followers must face the same fate. Following Jesus is the path of self-denial, the path of self-sacrifice.

And so last week we saw with the call to lose our lives, Mark gives us a glimpse of glory, the resurrection that's promised, the fact that Jesus is the one who can raise the dead to encourage us that in the end it's worth it.

[6 : 35] Losing our lives now leads to gaining everything in the future. But the disciples still don't get it. Their version or picture of glory, often like ours, is upside down.

Jesus has been talking about his death and resurrection. They've had a taste of that glory that's coming, but they still get things upside down. Look at verses 30 to 32.

Jesus predicts his death again, but they don't understand. And more than that, they, verse 32, they're afraid to ask him this time.

The last time they asked about it, they were told that their future is a cross. And Jesus, knowing what was going on in their hearts, takes the disciples aside to teach them specifically.

That's what he does in verse 35. And so he's teaching very pointedly the disciples what is required of those who follow him.

[7 : 36] This isn't teaching to the masses, to the crowds. This is for those who are following Jesus or who want to follow him. And there are three things that he says. First, to those who are preoccupied with being special, he says, be last.

Second, to those who prioritize status and seniority, he says, don't belittle others. And third, to those who would put down the saints, he says, you don't have license to exploit, no matter who you are.

So first, verses 33 to 37, to those who are preoccupied with being special, he says, be last. The upside down nature of God's kingdom requires humility.

Jesus' followers embrace the cross-shaped life that demands they put away all their aspirations of greatness in the world's eyes. Does anyone really not want to be special in some sense?

I'm sure most of us, if not all of us, will be able to see that and admit it about ourselves. For example, how many of us, when we've had an argument with someone or a disagreement or a run-in, when we inevitably run over it in our heads afterwards, how many of us come out of that argument the loser?

[9 : 02] And how many of us, as we rerun it in our heads, think about what we should have said cleverly, think about how we won the argument? Or equally, our aspirations are often set to want the best for ourselves, to be respected the most, to be seen as significant or special.

Our target is to stand out. Many of us want the great path on the back for everything we do. Many of us may even revel in finding flaws in others so that we look all the better.

We are very easily tempted to the I am special complex, rating and ranking ourselves against those around us or insisting that my voice needs to be heard.

I know everyone's voice shouldn't be heard, but mine should be. I know best. My view ought to come into the reckoning. Even in church, we'll have markers that set us apart from the average Christians.

Maybe it's because you teach the Bible in some setting. So your opinion matters more. Or you start to think that in some sense you're a little bit more special. Or maybe you think I lead the team for creche or for coffee or for carol singing, whatever it is.

[10 : 17] So I'm just a little bit more special than the rest. Of course, we rarely vocalize that, but I'm sure many of us at times have a rating that always puts ourselves slightly above the rest.

I know I certainly do at times. And perhaps young men are especially pruned to this sort of thing. It isn't unfamiliar for us to find someone who thinks that they are, in some particular sense, God's gift to the church.

But I'm sure I'm not on too rocky ground to say that we can all act or think like that from time to time. We can all be caught pointing to our training or to our role or to our title so that we seem that little bit more special.

Well, what Jesus exposes here in this passage is as contemporary as ever. Jesus asks the disciples what they've been discussing on the road in verse 34. They've been arguing about who's the greatest, who's special, who stands out.

They've just been taught that Jesus must die and that the path to glory, the path to glory with him is the path to the cross. But they are more worried about who's the best amongst them, who stands out, who will get the most honor for their efforts and abilities.

[11 : 47] Notice verse 33 and then verse 34, the phrase on the way. Mark uses that increasingly in these chapters. That means on the way to the cross. They're on the way to the cross but the disciples are more concerned with the things of man than the things of God.

That's how Peter was rebuked by Jesus when he refused to accept the cross the last time. And they're caught up in the same thing all over again. That is thinking with the mind and seeing with the eyes of man and not God and so getting things upside down.

But Jesus tells us what glory does look like and real glory, not the kind that we naturally esteem and get so wrong. He says verse 35, it means being last.

It means setting aside our predisposition to obsess about ourselves and our significance in this world. If we belong to Christ, we're united to him and we do and will share everything with him.

And so that frees us from having to build our own platform here and now. What does glory look like? It means being pleased to be the servant of all.

[13 : 13] It means serving people, not using people to get what we want. It's easier for us to even talk about people that we minister to and work with in a way that's revealing.

My young people, my students, but true glory looks like serving people, not using them to give us a platform.

I love being first. I love winning. I grew up in a house with two older brothers and the competitive age from a very young age was very strong. But Mark is telling us very clearly here and he's saying to all of us, you're not that special people.

And indeed we must embrace that. We'll share communion together this evening and communion reminds us of that. It's in our great need, from our great lack, that we all together receive the grace of God without which we would have nothing.

We're not that special. Verse 37, it is those who receive a child who receive Jesus. Those who embrace that they're not any more special than anyone else.

[14 : 36] Those who welcome even the most insignificant person. Now, verse 37 isn't to me misunderstood as Jesus celebrating how wonderful children are.

No, no. Children in that culture were recognized as being the smallest, the least significant. there was little to be gained from embracing a child, from investing in a child.

That wasn't the way to get ahead, quite the opposite. And now, for anyone who wants to conquer now the world of business or education or sports, or sadly even the church, or whatever they see as the pinnacle, the way to get there probably won't be by embracing the lowly and the insignificant.

that may be true in our world, but like the disciples, that is to have it all upside down. For Jesus' kingdom, to follow him to glory is to get your hands dirty in the unglamorous things for him.

Not because I'll help you stand out now, but just because you're doing it for Jesus, Jesus, and that in itself is glorious. In the church, we can get very caught up in esteeming those who are visible in their service, those who lead from the front, but perhaps those who've cleaned the floor for us to meet here, those who've come in early to make tea and coffee, those who quietly and faithfully invite friends to the service week after week.

[16 : 10] All of those things can be overlooked, but if they're done for Jesus, they're great things.

Every little thing done in Jesus' service or for Jesus' people is a glorious thing. They won't win you the prestige of this world. They maybe won't even win you prestige in the church, but that's okay.

It is a glorious thing to arrive at church and seek out the people who aren't well known, the ones that people won't notice. It's a glorious thing to invite people to Sunday lunch that you might find really hard work.

For even the littlest thing done in Jesus' name, or the littlest thing done for those who seem insignificant, the littlest thing done for Jesus that's a step of humble service is verse 37, receiving Jesus, but more than that, receiving the one who sent him.

In this world, being last is glorious, and giving up the praise of this world is being welcomed into Jesus' arms.

[17 : 32] Secondly, verses 38 to 41, to those who prioritize status or seniority, he says, don't belittle.

Don't belittle. The upside-down nature of God's kingdom requires loyalty, generosity to those who belong to Jesus. Jesus' followers embrace the cross-shaped life by putting away all thoughts of superiority to other gospel churches churches and other Christians.

Look at verse 38. Someone was casting out demons in Jesus' name, and the disciples tried to stop him because he wasn't one of them.

Children start the desire to be an in-croyd at a young age, but we would do very well to be aware that we can still be drawn into such a mentality, especially when it comes to church.

How easy it is to look down on others in our church even because they've come to us from a church that we wouldn't even dream of going to, or because they haven't done Cornhill or they haven't been through Release the Words, or because they can't articulate things just as we would want.

[18 : 50] Or how likely is it for us to write off brothers and sisters because their church doesn't teach the Bible as well as we think ours does? Or can we end up looking down on someone in our CU because their minister didn't go to a proper institution?

Or we quash someone because we think their church isn't a wonderful place like mine, one without problems. No, no, no.

Jesus says to the disciples, don't stop him. What's important is what's done for Jesus. So whilst our church has distinctives and not unimportant ones from others, we must not get caught up, get so caught up in them that we end up scorning real and fruitful and faithful gospel work that happens elsewhere.

Jesus doesn't, and we certainly shouldn't. To think that we in some way have the pure unadulterated method for ministry is to carry a smugness that doesn't fit the cross-shaped life.

New church, new Christian has a special place with Jesus or unique access more than anyone else. So whether it be a city center church of hundreds or thousands or one in an estate with 45 or one in a rural setting with 12, we mustn't belittle those who are plodding away at faithful ministries different to ours, just to swell our own significance.

[20 : 28] Verse 40, those who are not against us are for us. And this flew straight from the previous point. In both points, status is in view in some way.

And notice too that they're tied together by things done in Jesus' name. Verse 37, whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. And then verse 39, do not stop him for no one who does a mighty work in my name.

So again, Jesus says if you treat his people well, if you embrace his people, even if they don't look like one of us, even if they don't speak like one of us, even if they don't have our particular Christian language, if you embrace those who belong to Jesus and love him, them, then Mark says we will not lose our reward.

Other faithful Christians are no threat to us, but they're with us, they're for us. Welcoming the lowly, those who mightn't gain us anything, or giving a glass of water to one of Jesus' people, these things have much more to do with glory and greatness than celebrity does, or status, or even the grandest platform we can imagine.

And so flowing on from these verses, Jesus gives a very stark warning. Verses 42 to 50, to those who put down the saints, he says you do not have license to exploit no matter who you are.

[22 : 11] Jesus is making clear here that hell will be full of those who have grabbed hold of their own importance, those who are caught up in the idea that they are special and so treat Jesus' people with contempt.

The language in this section is rather frightening and stark, and when that's the case, we can often be tempted to find ways of explaining it that soften the blow. But if Jesus uses strong words, then it's most certainly because he wants a sharp warning to be heeded.

And the warning is that the cross-shaped life is about radical self-denial now. And that means, yes, taking sin very seriously, but more narrowly here, it means loving all who belong to Jesus, sacrificing for them.

In verse 42, Jesus has not suddenly jumped to a completely new topic. This all holds together these three sections. It all flows from being prepared to be last.

Both the previous points we've looked at have been about grasping at glory, and we've just seen that how we treat other Christians is very important. And so Jesus is drawing his teaching to a close here with verse 42.

- [23 : 34] Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin? And then verse 50 with be at peace with one another. It's language that's about the collective.

And so it would seem the stark warning is about how we treat each other. How do we treat our fellow Christians? You see, in this world, to achieve the status of being the greatest, it will always come to the expense of others.

You'll have to trample on people to get there. And we're not immune to this in church. Remember, Jesus is talking to his disciples here, and even they don't get to take this lightly.

None of us get a license to ignore this. So verse 42, it is better to be anchored to the bottom of the sea to drown than to mistreat and belittle and exclude those who belong to Jesus.

We do not want to turn people away from Jesus because of how we act, nor do we want to model for others a way of standing out that pushes other people down.

- [24 : 43] Notice the three uses of it is better. Verse 43, then verse 45, and then verse 47. It is better to enter life without a hand than with two hands to go to hell.

Better to limp into life with just one foot than to be thrown into hell with two. Better to lose our sight on the way to life than to see the whole way along the path to hell and its terrible fate.

It is better to lose your life now to save it. It is better to be last now to be first in the end. Do you see the consistency with these phrases?

The cross-shaped life must prioritize the future over the present. So if your hand causes you to push one of Jesus' little ones down so that you can get ahead, cut it off.

If your eye shows you the route to standing out in church and being the one everybody respects, but it means ignoring or cutting down brothers and sisters, then gouge that eye out.

- [25 : 58] If your foot is stubbornly unmovable from your little area of influence in church so that you remain important but ministry suffers, cut that foot off.

If this life is the one that we prioritize, if we want to be special now, if we think that in the service of God we can push people down to expand our ministry or our brand, and God won't be bothered as long as we're successful, then that is a very certain route to a very horrible hell.

Mark turns our attention to the end of Isaiah when he quotes verse 48, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. He's wanting to make clear the ferocity of the final judgment that is coming for those who oppose God and his people.

Isaiah says, the Lord will come in fire. He will render his anger in fury and his rebuke with flames of fire.

And verse 49, no one will escape it. No, no, no. No one will escape it. We don't get a special privilege for this kind of thing.

- [27 : 20] no matter who we are, no matter who our family is, no matter what our title is, the cross shaped life is not just about being prepared to suffer.

It's about denying ourselves the place of honor right now. It's about taking seriously the glory that Jesus promises in the future. And instead of plotting a route to the top in the Christian world now, it's about verse 35, being last, being servant of all.

We're after the upside down glory. The glory that comes from serving people just because they belong to Jesus, no matter their story, no matter what we get, no matter what it costs us, but just because they're one of Jesus' little ones like us.

That is a glorious thing. It's about prioritizing the future over the present, prioritizing the things of God over the things of man, because it is better to hobble and crawl as a nobody into the kingdom of God than to prance into hell with an archbishop's hat or a shiny dog collar or a big name, having ignored the little people that won't benefit us.

warning is stark. This life is to be characterized by being last, by losing our lives now, by loving the little ones, not taking advantage of them to build our own position.

[29 : 02] The disciples tried to stop ministry done in Jesus' name because the person wasn't one of them. He wasn't in their elite club. He wasn't one of the boys. But Jesus says whoever would treat one of his people in such a way, it would be better to drown.

But for those who do embrace the cross ship pattern, for those who are content to be and to love the little one, then he says you'll enter life.

You will know the real glory that's to come. You'll enter the kingdom of God. So as we commit to this unglamorous way that looks like things are not great, as we commit to the unglamorous looking things to serve the gospel, that is a glorious thing.

Every flask of tea made in the service of Jesus is a glorious thing. Every craft prepared to help teach children the Bible is a glorious thing.

Every effort to strike up a conversation about Jesus at the school gates or in the lunchroom is a glorious thing. But you might not get it celebrated as glorious right now.

[30 : 26] And so as we commit to these things as a church, as we're prepared to forego the world's acclaim in order to serve and be last, then verse 41, we will by no means lose our reward.

What a comfort to the person who knows this all too well that being faithful to Jesus, trying our best to serve him, does mean being cast out, does mean being unpopular.

Well, Jesus says, verse 37, you will receive him, but more than that, you'll receive the one who sent him. When we get the upside-down nature of real glory in God's kingdom, true glory by God's reckoning, then we can embrace that which is hard, that which is unglamorous, that which is costly, not just as the path to glory at the last day, which it is, but also as true glory right now.

He who is last will be first. Amen. Father, we thank you for all that we have in Jesus, that he is the great leveler, that as we celebrate communion, it tells us again of our great need, but our great need being met in him, so that whilst we're not particularly special, we do have all that we need, and one day we'll experience all the glory that this world knows as we're joined to our Savior.

Savior. And it's in his name we pray. Amen. . . Thank you.