

But Aren't I Special?!

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- [0 : 00] Well, we're going to read from the scriptures now from Mark's Gospel, Chapter 9. You'll find the passage in the orders of service here, if you don't have a Bible.
- And it's from Mark, Chapter 9, verse 30 to 50. I'll read, first of all, in English, and then Hamid is going to read in Farsi for our Farsi-speaking brothers and sisters.
- And it's a joy to have Rupert Hunt Taylor back this evening to preach to us. And welcome, Rupert. And this is the passage he's chosen. So let's look at Mark, Chapter 9, verse 30.
- Jesus and his disciples 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.
- [1 : 07] 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.
- 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.
- [2 : 08] For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I say to you, Whoever gives you a cup of cold water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.
- Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he was thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.
- It's better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.
- It's 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's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where the 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?
- [3 : 22] Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another. Amen. Well, friends, thank you for having me back.

I'm glad to say that Ed and Renorth haven't quite kicked me out yet, but it is a real joy to see so many friendly faces again. I wonder if you would turn back to Mark chapter 9 and verse 30, printed on the service sheets if you pick one up.

And let's bow our heads and ask for our Father's help. Lord God, we pray this evening that you would help us to take you at your words. We pray for Josh, as no doubt his mind is full of many things.

And we pray for each one of us with hearts and minds that often don't want to hear what your son has to say. By your spirit, Father, do your work in us tonight and help us to follow after Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen. Well, often our nicknames say, a lot more about us than perhaps we'd like to admit. I was born short and yellow, with stumpy legs and a pot belly, and so my parents quickly took to calling me poo.

[4 : 40] Which was fine, I guess, until I got to school, because you realise pretty quickly that the word poo has a crucial silent H at the end of it. And that letter at the end isn't always obvious to your mates, is it?

When the word is called across the schoolyard by your adoring parents, parents can be very cruel, as if Rupert wasn't bad enough. It could be worse though, I think.

Jose Mourinho, the Man United boss now, he surely has the most embarrassing nickname of them all, doesn't he? Because it says just a little bit too much about his self-regard. Please don't call me arrogant, he said at his first ever press conference in charge of a UK team, but I'm European champion, and I think I'm a special one.

And from that moment on, as far as the British press were concerned, his fate was sealed. Jose Mourinho would forever be known as the special one. Not a great nickname to hold if one day you'll have to look the Lord Jesus in the eye.

But there is a bit of a special one complex, isn't there, in every one of us. The big message, I think, of our age is that every child is special. We're all special, and we all deserve to have our own special needs met, and our great goal in life is to become more special, to achieve some sort of greatness, rank or title or wealth or fame or power or influence.

[6 : 08] I think those are the messages we tell our kids from the earliest age and they stick in our hearts right through life. But a chapter or so back in this gospel, Jesus started the job of digging that message out of us.

He's been showing us what kind of special one, what kind of Messiah he is. But it seems like his disciples cannot and will not take that message in.

Their thinking is infected with what Jesus calls the things of man, thinking that puts glory here and now before everything else. And so now, for a second time in this gospel, Jesus gives those disciples a massive, stark warning about his coming death and resurrection.

The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill him. And when he's killed, only then, after three days, he'll rise again. That's what glory is going to look like for Jesus, the Messiah.

And for a second time, he tells them, it has to be the cross first and only then the crown, only then glory and resurrection.

[7 : 26] And once again, verse 32, his disciples do not understand a word of it. And this time, we're given one more little detail by Mark. Now, they're afraid even to ask what it means.

You see, Jesus' message, as his disciples have followed him in this book on the road towards the cross, it has not been a very comfortable message to listen to. Peter didn't like it one bit and that provoked a furious response from Jesus because if the cross comes before the crown for Jesus, then it has to be the same for his disciples.

death before glory, death to sin and self and status. And it seems now that they're scared to hear Jesus repeat that message.

They don't want to hear him say it again. Maybe denial is just more comfortable. Perhaps the hardest lesson of all for us human disciples to learn is that I am simply not that special, at least not in the ways I tend to believe.

If there's anything special about me from a biblical perspective, it's that by God's sheer grace, I'm being made back into his image, made more like his son, more like someone who's willing to lay all his specialness aside.

[8 : 50] So what we get through this whole central section of Mark's gospel is a sustained explanation of what it looks like to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow after Jesus.

And it's aimed fairly and squarely at Jesus' disciples. Look at verse 31. He kept hidden because he was teaching his disciples.

That's the program here. Verse 35. He sat down, time for some formal teaching, and he called the twelve. And his basic message all the way through is what he tells them right there.

If anyone would be first, he must be last and servant of all. It's the cross before the crown. But the reason he has to spell this out so painfully so many times is that it's a message that every fiber in our bodies is going to want to reject.

Look what surrounds the whole passage. Look at the bookends. Jesus talks about his death and verse 34, his disciples argue about who's the greatest, who's the special one.

[10 : 04] And right to the end, verse 50, what's the summary? Worry about yourselves, have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. In other words, cut the crud, stop arguing.

None of you are that special. Get over yourselves. That's verses 30 to 50. We basically get three separate bits of teaching about our special one complex, those things of men, with the whole thing climaxing in this horrific warning about where that kind of human thinking leads.

A warning that makes our language when we talk about judgments and hell seem pretty anemic and pathetic, doesn't it? Jesus isn't nearly so squeamish. He loves too much to varnish his message.

So here's our main point then for this evening. Hell is full of special people. Hell is full of special people. People, in fact, just like these disciples.

Because doesn't their reaction to Jesus' message seem so bonkers to us. Doesn't it seem crazy? Jesus has just told them about the cross being at the heart of everything.

[11 : 17] They're on the road towards it and that's when they start squabbling about who'll get what honor when they arrive in Jerusalem. Who'll get a seat in the house of lords and who's going to get stuck with an OBE.

It seems bonkers to us, doesn't it, to think that a bunch of fishermen could be so jumped up about their status and job title and position unless we know ourselves well enough.

I can be capable of some very crass thinking, very ambitious thinking. I'm sure you can too. I can daydream about it even while I'm sitting through a sermon on the gospel.

Can't you? Maybe we're not all that different. And notice Jesus sees right through them. They've been avoiding him along this road, muttering quietly to themselves, scared to front up to him and ask, but he knows, doesn't he, what's going on in their hearts and it's not the cross.

So he gives them these three little connected paragraphs, spelling out what it means to embrace his way rather than glory here and now.

[12 : 26] If we're going to follow Jesus, we shouldn't look for any kind of special status or special access to him or special passes when it comes to our own sin.

Especially Josh, guys, those of us who want to call ourselves leaders in Jesus' church. First, verses 33 to 37, special status.

And that desire is just so natural to us, isn't it? Think how today even clergy like to give ourselves funny titles and ranks and costumes and set ourselves apart.

Some denominations do it the posh way. Our type just do it by the way we rank our staff on the church websites. But we all do it, don't we? We want a special status. I was dead chuffed to move to Edinburgh North Church and become their first pastor, the vicar, until I discovered they already had a nickname for our friend Pete Dixon.

They call him the Bishop of Bingham. So now I've got to promote myself to Archbishop or I'm going to be in Pete's Shadow forever. I thought I'd escaped.

[13 : 38] I thought I'd got the status. But we all play that game, don't we? My kids at the moment, they love a cartoon that's set in a dog shelter. And the running joke in this cartoon is the miserable official who runs the place.

Every episode he comes up with some cunning plan to impress the mayor and get his dream promotion. He's longing to be made head of sanitation.

Escape the dog shelter. That's the dream. Just one rung up on the ladder of life. Well the apostles have cottoned on to the fact that Jesus' kingdom is coming and so they head towards Jerusalem like a government in waiting.

Heads full of who's going to get what important position when they arrive. But if they'd been paying attention, they'd know it was martyrdom they were waiting for. That's where this highway through the wilderness is leading.

And to Jesus, look at verse 35, that is the mark of true greatness. To become a servant. And that's why he brings this little child into the middle of the room, isn't it?

[14 : 45] And picks him up in his arms. Don't misunderstand it. Jesus doesn't say there's something special about kids. It's not sentimental. It's not that kids are innocent or trusting or anything like that. No, the point in Mark is quite the opposite.

Kids were nobodies. In fact, assuming Jesus is speaking Aramaic, the word for child is probably the very same as the word for servant. It's a nobody.

This is not a culture that idolizes children. You're more likely to give them a clip around the ears and send them off to feed the chickens, muck out the goats. It's not a child-centered culture.

There's nothing to be gained by welcoming a little child, is there? That's the point. They can't offer you anything. So if what you care about is status and connection, well, a child is just a waste of your time.

And yet, receive an ordinary little child who belongs to Jesus, verse 37, and you receive the father himself. Welcome the servant, and you welcome the king.

[15 : 52] Want the crown? first take up your cross. Make an effort with those people you think are beneath you. So we don't need endless ranks and titles in the church, do we?

One great thing about being here at the Tron is that you always get a good handshake on the door, and then usually another one on your way out from the minister or the preacher or the location pastor or whoever it is. And that's a great way for us to catch people at the end and chat to them about the sermon.

It's past really a very helpful time. But I wonder, though, which handshake we notice more. Did we realize that the bloke who shook our hands on the way in this evening is just as much of a big shot in Jesus' kingdom as the one standing there on the way out?

In fact, it was the Logie sisters, wasn't it? Maybe more of a big shot. We'll never know. Well, we'll know one day. We'll know in heaven, won't we? If you want to follow me, Jesus says, don't expect special status.

And next, verses 38 to 41, don't go looking for special access. There's no inside circle, is there, when it comes to Jesus? Either you belong to him or you don't.

[17 : 03] But doing some special job in his church can't bring you any closer. And that's what John was looking for, isn't it? He seems ministry as something to be done by a private privileged group who are on the inside with Jesus.

So we see some itinerant Bampot wandering around invoking Jesus' name, and it gets his hackles up. He isn't part of the club, is he? Who does he think he is? But again, Mark is piling on the irony, isn't he?

Jesus has just talked about welcoming little ones in his name, and here's a man working in Jesus' name, verse 38, who John refuses to accept.

You see the point? It wasn't really about children, was it? This is what little ones look like. People without recognition, or important roles in the denomination, or connections to the right people.

And I guess the real sting is that just a page ago, we saw Jesus in a circle, his disciples trying to cast out a demon of their own, and completely stuffing it up.

[18 : 12] Because they didn't pray, it was all about them, their ability. So here's a nice little dig in the ribs for them. This guy, whoever he is, at least he's trusting Jesus. And ultimately, that's what matters.

Not, is he following us, verse 38, but is he following Jesus? There are plenty of Christians, I guess, in Scotland whose theology we probably look down on a little, and whose philosophy of ministry isn't quite our own.

And that's okay, it's why we've got our own little didasko family, isn't it? We can wish them all well, and get on with ministry the way we think best, and let a thousand flowers bloom. But just because we aren't in the same club doesn't mean we get some kind of special priority in Jesus' kingdom.

John had a very important role to play, didn't he? Maybe, well, definitely more important than any of us. But the job I'm given doesn't bring me any closer to Jesus.

It's worth just pausing and asking yourself, are you serving hard in your name or in his name? Is it all for the sake of your own greatness, or is it simply for the joy of serving him?

[19 : 32] My special role in church doesn't get me any closer to him, which is why, just as we don't need archbishops archbishops and popes, Jesus doesn't have any use for priests, does he?

My job as a pastor isn't to worm my way into Jesus in a circle so that people can get close to me and get in on the action. I can't dish out the holiness, and you don't need Josh to do that either, do you?

Remember that little child? Welcome him, you welcome Jesus. That's how this family works. But John was so busy polishing his imaginary crown, that when a little one came knocking, he turned his nose up.

And without knowing it, he turned up his nose at the king himself, missed out on his chance to receive him. Denying ourselves means giving up the hope of special access to Jesus himself.

There's no such thing as there as a super Christian, which means you and I need to watch out if we tend to guard our role in church with a kind of protective jealousy.

[20 : 40] There's something about religious activity, isn't there, which brings that sort of behavior out of us. Only I really know how to do this job properly. It's not as simple as they all seem to think. Only I can have this role.

That feeling that I've made myself particularly useful in Christ's church, that I've got some sort of special in with Jesus, most of us find that feeling hard to resist.

But none of us are indispensable, are we? We're just not that special. And so thirdly, verses 42 to 50, we get the warning. Taking up our cross and denying ourselves means not expecting any special passes when it comes to our sin.

None of us are such big shots in Jesus' kingdom that he's going to turn a blind eye to our behavior, not even the 12. Now, if Jesus' language here doesn't shock you, then, friend, you might just need a lobotomy.

Because it is meant to be a gruesome picture, isn't it? Three times he talks about hell. Three times he mentions a fire that never stops smoldering. It's a picture of a festering rubbish dump.

[21 : 51] The word he uses is Gehenna, the name of the tip outside Jerusalem. And he's picturing it littered with corpses, living corpses riddled with worms, shut out forever from life, from the kingdom.

Jesus is more plain and serious and direct when he talks about hell than anyone else in the Bible, isn't he? Gentle, loving Jesus. And that quote he uses there in verse 48, those are literally the very last words of the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah chapter 66, verse 24. Massively significant in Mark's big picture. You see, Isaiah tells a story that Mark is constantly tapping into, the story of a new exodus.

God's people are lost in the wilderness because of their sin, but at last he has stepped into their world and ransomed his people and led them home. And Isaiah's story ends there in chapter 66 in a brand new heaven and a brand new earth.

But at the same time, there's this picture of terrible judgment for those who rebel against him. A worm that never dies.

[23 : 10] A fire that's never quenched. Well, back to Mark. And who does Jesus say that fire is reserved for? Not, I think, the people we might expect.

It's not for sinners in general. No, the ones who miss out on that new exodus, the new heavens and the new earth are the ones who refuse to walk Jesus' way of the cross.

All through this section of Mark's gospel, Jesus has been leading his people along that highway out of the wilderness, the only road back home to God. A road of repentance.

A road where we share in Jesus' cross. But that's what his disciples have struggled to accept. You see, it's not sin in general he's talking about here, is it?

Look carefully at verse 42. It's those who cause these little ones who believe in him to sin. Those who are so puffed up with their own pride and glory that they end up damaging Jesus' ordinary disciples because they won't take up their cross and I think they lead others astray.

[24 : 25] He's got a very specific set of sins in mind here, I think. Bickering and boasting and big egos. You sometimes hear wise old pastors say there are three sins which tend to ruin a Christian ministry.

Almost always when a high flying preacher comes crashing down, it boils down to gold, girls, or glory. The desire to grasp at those things and abuse our position to get them, that is just too tempting to overcome.

Gold, girls, and glory. Temptations we all face, but they only get worse with position and power. And those sorts of sins damage little ones who believe in Jesus more than any other.

So by all means, yes, we should take this as a warning to deal radically with any sin in our lives. But above all, we need to remember that those little ones, those ordinary plain Jane Christians are very, very precious to Jesus Christ.

And if we treat them with indifference or set them a bad example through our own self-importance, well, one day, verse 42, we'll wish we could vanish without trace to the bottom of the ocean.

[25 : 48] So if my eye is constantly envying someone else's position, I'd be better off gouging that eye out than giving in to what it wants. I don't believe that, do I?

But Jesus tells me it's true. If my hand is always trying to grasp for more money and less sacrifice, more prestige and less service, I'd be better off hacking that hand away.

If my foot is always restless for the job or the house or the position that's going to win friends and influence people, I would be better off on crutches because it's the cross first and only then the crown.

that's the way Jesus is leading us. And verse 49, every one of us is going to be seasoned by bearing that cross from the greatest to the least.

Even you disciples, even you 12, that's what he's saying, isn't it? No special passes. And that struggle, that denial of ourselves, that is a good, pleasing struggle to God.

[26 : 54] So worry about that, verse 50, worrying about having salt in yourselves, because if you're so busy squabbling with each other about position and status, then how on earth are you going to point others to my kingdom?

Hell is full of special people, isn't it? Churchgoers who convince ourselves that we've got some sort of special status or special spiritual access or a special pass for our sin.

And that is a hard message for us to hear. It is at least for me. Because that special thinking worms its way into my heart all the time. I really do believe there's something special about me.

But if that's a hard lesson to learn, well, take heart. Because there is also some very encouraging news I want us to notice before we close. No, no, I'm not a big shot in Jesus' kingdom.

But the wonderful thing here is that it is quite enough to be one of Jesus' little ones. That is all he asks of me, isn't it?

[28 : 10] Hell might be full of special people, but heaven is for little ones. And we don't need to labor the point because hopefully you've seen it by now, but just notice how many ways in this passage Jesus is reassuring us that ordinary is okay.

Let's start with the most difficult bit, shall we? Those verses that speak so shockingly about how we deal with sin. Because even there, it's not a call to some sort of spiritual heroics, is it?

He's not saying that if only you fight hard enough, if only you punish yourself enough and conquer your pride and beat your sin, you can win your way into heaven. Because he's already told us how deep our sin problem goes.

Back in chapter 7, he said that the real problem wasn't my eye or my hand or my leg, the real problem's inside me. That's where the sewer is. I can't amputate my heart, but that's what I'd need to do to conquer this sort of sin.

So this isn't a call to heroics. It's not about perfectionism. It's the little ones who need his grace and who know it. And who take their sins seriously.

[29 : 27] It's them who win the crown. And he's reassuring them about that crown right through the passage, isn't he? Verse 37. Receive an insignificant little child and you welcome the king.

Sure, he won't be handing out medals and gongs to the super Christians. But in Jesus' kingdom, even the most insignificant little child is connected to royalty.

And verse 41 takes it further, doesn't it? Even the tiniest thing you do in Jesus' name is a precious thing in his eyes.

And it's something that will never, ever be forgotten. That littlest act of kindness to his people. Just a cup of cold water. And God's response is ridiculously over the top.

A crown you can never, ever lose. Josh, there is great reward in following Jesus into a life of service.

[30 : 30] There's reward now in seeing others flourish. And there's reward at the end when you claim back the big salary you've passed up and the tears you shed and all the sleep you lost.

And brother, let me just say this. You have had the very best of starts in ministry, surrounded by fantastic people who love the gospel and who are all very able in different ways.

But sometimes along with that, you can start to worry that the goal is to become something you're not quite able to be. You worry that every sermon has to be special because you're surrounded by very impressive people.

You can worry that your capacity to handle things ought to be the same as the people you're learning from. But that isn't what God expects from you, brother.

The goal isn't to become special or even to match up. The goal is just to use whatever Christ has given you for his service.

[31 : 36] And to do that with thankfulness and to point all the praise back to him. There's a great reward in becoming one of his little ones.

And that is all he asks of any of us, isn't it? Yes, the cross comes first. And that cuts against our nature to deny ourselves and become ordinary and accept our limitations.

To some people, that might look like an utter waste of a life. But the cross isn't really ordinary at all, is it? The cross is powerful.

It's the way Jesus himself took on the world and the flesh and the devil. And it is privilege enough to follow him along that road. It's all he asks of us, to give up on our pride and become one of his little ones.

And one day we'll understand that there is nothing greater that any of us could ever be. Well, let's pray.

[32 : 45] If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all. Father God, help us to believe there is something very special in being an ordinary follower of Jesus Christ.

That to become like him truly is the greatest calling, the greatest privilege we could ever ask for. We shudder, Lord, at the warnings in this passage.

And yet we rejoice at the same time, knowing the depths to which Jesus went to save us from that hell.

And so we pray, Father, that his cross would run so deep in our little family of churches that it controls everything we think and feel and do, both as we hold it out with joy as the solution to our sinfulness.

And also as we follow him along this road of service and self-giving, not for the sake of our pride and position, but for the love of him who's stooped to serve us.

[34 : 03] Help us, Father, to follow him. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.