

Mark 9:30-37

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

There's not a lot I remember from Kindergarten, but I do remember a couple of my classmates arguing about their dads. "My dad can beat up your dad," one of my friends said to another one of my friends. I realize now in retrospect what that was. Ambition. We were viewing our dads as extensions of ourselves. Through our dads we wanted to be better, more powerful, and more important than our classmates.

Ambition never left my classroom through the years of my education. It found its way into discussions about report cards; talks about our soccer and basketball teams; and right out onto the playground when we picked teams for kickball – we all wanted to get picked first. Ambition only got kicked into a higher gear in high school. Sports got to be higher profile and GPA became ever more important.

We all know that ambition goes way beyond the school day. It reaches into family units, corporate life, fishing tournaments, and even Friday night parties. Everyone has it. Maybe you're saying, "No. I don't think that's true. I know some pretty laid back people. There's nothing they're shooting for right now." The reality is that they too have ambition it's just that their ambition is simply to avoid meaningfully engaging in life for the Lord.

That's why ambition is so important for us to think through. It's important to Jesus too. It's so important to him that Jesus preaches a whole sermon on the topic – a sermon just for his disciples. That's why Jesus was purposefully staying out in hick country, Galilee. He wanted to just talk to his disciples. He understood the idea, "out of sight, out of mind." It wasn't time to deal with the public. That time would soon come. It was time here and now to deal with his disciples. That's one of the reasons why this full sermon from Jesus is so unique. And this sermon is unique! Unlike so many other teachings of Jesus, he didn't preach this because the Pharisees had asked him yet another critical question. And it wasn't preached because the teachers of the law had yet again challenged Jesus' authority on some issue. It came out of a

very real need *for Christians* to grapple with ambition and then sanctify it for the Lord. If it was that important to Jesus, then it's also that important to us. That's why we're going to spend the next two weeks in church letting Jesus give us a crash course on what holy ambition looks like.

So let's dive in. Ambition for Christians starts with Jesus. I'm really not sure how Mark could have made that more clear. Look at where he starts. **They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." (v. 30-32)** Jesus designed his travel plans so he could quietly teach his disciples. He must have wanted to teach them something important. It was. "Guys, are you getting this? I'm going to be betrayed in the hands of people. I'm going to be killed. I'm going to rise. Guys, are you hearing me on this?"

And then juxtaposed right next to that teaching is this well-known story about the disciples arguing on the road. Check out how Mark goes on. **They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. (v. 33-34)** Now you just have to think about that for a second or you're going to miss how brilliant Mark is here. Two seconds after Jesus has this big important talk about how it was his ambition to be betrayed, killed, and resurrected we get this story that's all about human ambition. Do you see what's happening here? Mark places the holy ambition of the Son of God side by side with the unholy, messed up ambition of these Christians.

It's actually kind of jarring when you really put it altogether. Jesus is getting very close to the cross. It's really on his mind. He brings it up three times in a row in this section of Mark. He talks about it at Caesarea Philippi, then at the Transfiguration, and then again here. It's really on his mind because it's his ambition to sacrifice himself for the world. As the Son of God wrestles with that thought and desperately tries to share it with the people closest to him, his confidants are getting worked up how they're going to launch their careers and see their stars rise on the back of Jesus' coming kingdom. Mark puts those two ambitions side by side for us to ponder on. Here's sacrifice. There's selfishness.

Do you see what Mark's doing? He's posing a question to his reader. He's asking us to stack up our ambition next to Jesus' ambition and ask, "So how does yours look now?" I went to my sister's graduation from Marquette this past spring. I always find the speeches at graduations fascinating. When I go to those things not always, but often the thought is the same one you find on posters about ambition: *Aspire to follow your dreams. Aspire to self-advancement and personal dream fulfillment.* And that's what's set up for us as a healthy human ambition. Now set that down right next to Jesus' ambition (That's what Mark is doing here!) who made it his dream to make the dreams of others a reality and to sacrifice himself. Mark is

asking us a question, “Do you see the un-holiness of that kind of ambition as it sits there next to Jesus’ ambition?” The reaction of the disciples is telling, isn’t it? Do you remember what they did when they saw Jesus’ ambition and theirs stacked side by side? Mark told us, “They kept quiet.” They knew. They got it. They were actually embarrassed. For Christians, there is no defending unholy ambitions.

So we’re back to square one. I’ve been reading through the book of Isaiah in my personal devotions lately. There’s a phrase in there that stuck out. God promised to do something completely mind blowing with his Messiah. It’s there that Isaiah says, “The zeal of the Lord will accomplish this.” Zeal. Passion. Fire. Ambition. God’s ambition was simple: I want you with me! That ambition was in his heart and from that ambition a plan was hatched and took shape. He firmly decided, “I will send my Son. He will be betrayed. He will be killed. He will rise. That is my ambition.” It became Jesus’ ambition too. I told you once. I’ll tell you again. Jesus couldn’t stop talking about it. He talked about it at Caesarea Philippi, then at the Transfiguration, and then again here. It was his ambition to sacrifice himself for our unholy I-want-my-star-to-rise-kind of ambitions. It was his ambition and he did it.

Have you ever seen those posters that are supposed to help us live out good values? They have one inspirational word with a picture and then a caption. I think there’s one on highway 10 in Forest Junction right now about Henry Ford. I showed you one earlier in the sermon for ambition. I wish the right one for ambition actually existed. I’ve got it in my head. I’m just not artistic enough to make a poster of it. I’d put a cross up there on the screens with the word, “Ambition,” followed by this caption, “To Sacrifice Himself for You.” Think about that. He made it his sole focus. He made it his life’s work and the joy of his heart to sacrifice himself. For you. I keep saying that hoping it will get into your soul. You’ve been bought, paid for, and delivered into the heavenly Father’s family. That was Jesus’ passionate ambition and it is his holy will that you know and believe that.

The God-man who had that ambition is the same one who called his disciples to himself and said this, **“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” (v. 35)** Only Jesus could get away with teaching this. Only him. Anybody else would say it and be totally hypocritical. It’s such a giving, free, radical way to live. I think the Greek here is awesome. It says, “Of all be the last.” “Of all be the servant.” It screams at you, “Every last, living human being is more important than you. Everyone. All.” It’s absolute. Only Jesus could get away with a teaching like this. Because he lived it. He was your servant. He tossed away riches, wealth, power. He tossed aside his life. He tossed it all aside. For what? For sacrifice. That’s true greatness. Do you see it? It’s greatness that saved you.

And – I’m praying – greatness that inspires you to be great too. **“He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.’” (v. 37)** I wonder if the little guy was a toddler or if he was just strong enough to grab Jesus hands and stand up in front of Jesus. There he stands. Jesus says, “Make this

your ambition. Welcome the little people. That's what true greatness is." And Jesus did mean the little people. We're going to talk about this a bit more next week, but John caught the meaning right away. He got to thinking about an adult that he thought that his personal ambition might have wronged. Jesus was talking here about the little people.

Why does Jesus bring up those kinds of people? Because big people don't matter? No. That's not it. By going to the frailest parts of humanity, Jesus is saying, "Welcome the smallest of the small and the weakest of the weak. If you do that, you'll welcome everyone else too." Little people require the most service. Most of you here know that my life got rocked a couple of weeks ago because God gave us the chance to adopt a baby. Being Elliana's parent, I've learned two things right away: 1. Moms are saints. 2. Babies are a lot of work. And it's thankless. Elliana has yet to hug me or coo thanks at me (let alone at Melanie). Babies need sacrifice. They're too helpless or young to even know to say thanks. That's why Jesus took a child in his arms and said, "Make it your ambition to welcome these kind of people."

And you do it, "In his name." Nobody talks that way anymore today. It would sound weird if someone tried. "In the name of so and so, I'm here doing this or that." We don't talk like that. But we still do play by those same rules. I order something on Amazon. Amazon ships it by UPS. I wait for the UPS guy. The UPS guy shows up in brown and I sign for it. The UPS guy is there carrying out the mission of UPS because he's the UPS guy and that's what UPS guys do. If I asked the UPS guy, "Why are you on my doorstep?" First of all, he'd think I'm a weird guy for asking the question, then he'd say something like, "I'm here to deliver your package. I'm the UPS guy." And that's why we welcome little people. Because we're Jesus people. That's what we do. That's why we're here.

So here's my question: do you see how Jesus is liberating you from personal ambition and elevating you with his teaching to something so much greater? It doesn't have to be our ambition to be great or powerful or to build our personal brand, or stash of wealth. We've been freed from personal ambitions like that. How? Jesus has given to us infinite value, wealth, and status. For the third time in this sermon, I'm going to tell you what Jesus said three times in this part of Mark: He would be betrayed, be killed, and raised to life. Jesus was ambitious for you to finally free you from being ambitious for you. Free to welcome the little people because that's what you do now and it's who you are. More on ambition next week. Amen.