

Descending into Greatness

Mark 9:30-37 ⁰ Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it. ³¹ For He taught His disciples and said to them, "The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day." ³² But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him. ³³ Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. ³⁵ And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."

Mark 9:38-42 ³⁸ Now John answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ "For he who is not against us is on our side. ⁴¹ "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. ⁴² " But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.

Being in different countries exposes you to different cultures. One of the things I have taken note of is the kind of small talk that people make when they are getting to know each other. Perhaps my experience is unique, but I found that in America, and in Australia, and in the East, people ask you your name; what you think of the weather; what you think of the place you're in; if you have family around if you've watched the sport recently. Then I noticed a question that South Africans, or maybe more specifically Johannesburgers, almost always ask after a few questions, a question I didn't get asked in other countries. "So what do you do?" I've found that fairly quickly, Johannesburgers want to know what kind of job you do, whereas often in conversations in other countries, it simply didn't come up at all.

I asked myself why. Maybe we're just a busy city, and we want to know how everyone occupies his time. But more likely, it is because we live in a very proud, competitive city, and asking what someone does is a way of ranking them higher or lower than oneself. Ours is an environment in which people are continually sizing each other up; looking at what clothes you wear, looking at your make of car; asking which neighbourhood you live in. Why? Let's call it what it is a lot of the time - pride. We want to be exalted above others. Man competes, and he competes in the things that he values most: money, possessions, prestige.

But we belong to a different city, though we live in this one. The law of our city, the New Jerusalem is that what goes down, will come up. He that exalts himself will be abased; he who humbles himself will be exalted. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. If we allow the Johannesburg ethic to infect us, we will be non-starters in Christian growth. But it's hard to get it out your system.

So we get a bit of comfort when we read of the disciples having an argument about who was going to be the best, come first, and be the top of the spiritual pile. The Gospels don't shrink from showing us the human and sinful side of the disciples.

This is the last six months of Christ's life, and Jesus is now reminding His disciples how this is going to come to a conclusion: He will die on a cross, and rise again. But something in them cannot rightly interpret this. And perhaps one of the cataracts in their spiritual eyes was the problem of pride. These men still had worldly ideas of achievement.

On one of these long walks, they have this debate. Disciples did not dare walk side by side with their masters in those days, nor did the footpaths allow for it. So picture the Twelve strung out in a long line, with Jesus at the front. And along the way, someone brings up the edifying topic of which of them will be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. They must have traded their achievements, and swapped spiritual Cvs, and barked out their qualifications to each other, while Christ was at the head, hearing the tones of voice that mean an argument is going on.

When they arrive at their destination, Jesus asks them what the argument was about. And they are ashamed to tell him. They were personally ambitious. They wanted pre-eminence. Their debate was rooted in pride.

Jesus does something surprising.

³⁵ *And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."*

We might have expected him to simply say – you should not want to be first. You should not want to be great. Instead, He tells the disciples how they can be first. You can be first, if you will be last of all and servant of all.

Was Jesus simply squashing their debate with irony, nullifying their desire, basically saying – give it up?

I don't think so. I think he is taking what possible good there was in their debate, and re-directing it. It is not wrong to desire spiritual achievement. It is not wrong to be filled with desire to excel in God's kingdom. Some think that lack of zeal, lack of initiative, lack of desire to do great exploits for God is humility and godliness. Not at all. Our Lord wants these men to be ambitious, but in a God-pleasing way. He wants them to compete for the prize, but in the right way. Here is the right way: in God's order, we compete to humble ourselves and serve each other.

Romans 12:10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing *honor*.

The prize, in God's kingdom, goes to the one who sacrificed the most, gave himself up the most for the good of others. Greatness comes from humility. But if he has done that sincerely, what is his real prize? The good and spiritual joy of those he has served. He wants spiritual achievement, but not for the petty sake of having people admire him. He wants to be one of God's best, but not for the cheap reward of the praise of man, or for the shabby prize of ruling over others. He desires spiritual eminence for God's glory, and for man's good.

I hope you are spiritually ambitious. I hope you dream of doing great things for God. I hope you are one of those soldiers of Christ who wishes to give Satan's army a mortal wound. I hope you long to greatly build what God is building. But you will make no progress without humility.

What does this humility look like? What does this spiritual greatness actually look like in real life? Jesus explains with the illustration of a child. To descend into greatness, you must be humble. And your humility will show up in three ways: it must be willing to receive any in Jesus name, be willing to believe in Jesus name, and be willing to protect in Jesus' name.

I. Be Willing to Receive in Jesus' Name

³⁶ *Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He*

said to them, ³⁷ *"Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."*

How does receiving a child illustrate this principle? Well, consider that in Aramaic, the word for *child* and the word for *servant* were the same word. In the ancient world, there were no children's rights. Children were truly helpless and without status. They were to be seen and not heard. For these disciples, who were jostling one another for status and rights and first place, would never think of stooping down to welcome a child to Christ. In their dreams of grandeur, they did not see themselves talking to children, but to princes, generals, kings, and captains. Not kids!

A child cannot exalt you much. A child cannot add to your ego. A child cannot add to your glory. Serving a child is entirely a matter of pouring yourself into the child. You stoop, you enter their world, you treat them as equals, you humble yourself. You change your vocabulary, you may even change your posture, but if you truly want to receive such a one, you have to forget yourself. You have to deny your own dignity and posturing, and go back in time, back to where you used to be years ago, and return there for the sake of serving another human being, albeit a young one.

Jesus says, "If for My name's sake you receive such a lowly one, you receive Me. And if you welcome or honour the Son, you welcome and honour the Father, the One that sent Him". Could there be a more important One to receive? No!

But the path to such glories is unlikely. You do not climb high up to the top palace of Jerusalem to welcome and honour Jesus. You stoop down, perhaps onto your knees to get eye-level with a simple, weak, child. But if you stoop to receive one for Christ's sake, you've received Him, and you've received the Father.

The principle is, humble people will be willing to serve the smallest, weakest, simplest. Paul would later say,

"Romans 12:16" ¹⁶ *Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.*

The humble are willing to serve the poor, the despised, the outcasts, the difficult, the maimed, the orphan, the widow, the people who cannot pay you back or exalt you and help you on your upward climb.

And who is the ultimate example of this? Our Lord Himself. Look at just a few verses later.

Mark 10:13-16 ¹³ *Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them.* ¹⁴ *But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God.* ¹⁵ *"Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it."* ¹⁶ *And He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them.*

I find this one of the most remarkable images in all of Scripture. Here is the Word, the one who created all things, whose voice shook Mount Sinai and made the Israelites scream in terror; the One who stretched out galaxies the way you open the curtains in the morning, and here He is, taking children into His arms. Once again, the disciples had it backwards. They thought, Jesus was so important, He was not to be bothered by insignificant children. But Jesus is greatly displeased by this, and commands that the little children be allowed to come. Jesus holds them, and blesses them. Here is goodness and greatness, meekness and majesty, power and gentleness. He has modelled for us this humility. The Highest One stooped down to receive the littlest ones.

Humility stoops down to receive and serve others. Because, in the end, it doesn't matter how much you *talk* about pride and humility as ideas and concepts. What matters is what you *do*, and one of the quickest tests of your pride or your humility is - who do you receive? Who are you willing to listen to, and talk to, and be kind to, and serve, for Christ's sake? And if there's someone too low, too poor, too rich, too uneducated, too uncultured, for you, then you haven't learnt how to descend into greatness. You're still measuring yourself by others, comparing yourself to others, and trying to find a place on your own steam.

In fact, at this point, John has probably come under conviction, because he remembers someone who was casting out demons in Jesus name whom He did not receive. And he tells Jesus:

³⁸ Now John answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. ⁴⁰ "For he who is not against us is on our side. ⁴¹ "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.

Whoever this person was, he was not fooling around like the seven sons of Sceva who we read about in the book of Acts. This person seems to have been a genuine believer, seeking to be used by God. But the pride of the disciples kicked in – he was not part of their group. He did not have the stamp. And because he was outside the group, they stopped him. They did not want to receive him.

This is pride at work. Pride loves its cliques and its approved groups. It loves to build walls too high for others to get over. We all enjoy feeling we are members of an elite club.

But Jesus says, that's not how you descend into greatness. Humility receives others in My name. If he did a true miracle in My name, it is not likely that he will be against Me. And if he is not opposed to Me, then he is with us. If he serves Me, however small the way, then don't forbid him. Don't reject him.

How quickly we become tribal. How quickly our pride wants to declare which Christians are out, and which are in. Especially as we grow in doctrinal knowledge, and we see all the errors out there. We can make the mistake of believing no one except us has the truth – no one else checks. If you do that, you will almost certainly become a narrow-spirited, joyless, if not paranoid Christian.

Humility will receive the good that others do for Christ. Now that does not mean that we drop the importance of doctrine. It does not mean we do not hold to the importance of consistent Christian living. But what it does mean is that as humble Christians, while seeing our differences, while disagreeing (perhaps even vigorously), we will still celebrate when they do hold to the Gospel, and when they do some good in Christ's name. Paul could even do this with people who opposed him.

Philippians 1:15-18 *¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will: ¹⁶ The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; ¹⁷ but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.*

Some people have the approach to other Christians that one church historian did. He wrote a book in which he put black hats or white hats on all the major characters, depending on whether their influence was positive or negative. And many a Christian wants to do that with living Christians – is

he black hat or white hat? Sometimes the answer is that he is a Christians with many faults, but there are some good things to glean from his ministry.

It's pride that wants to exclude all but the approved dinner circle. It's pride that won't receive the smallest and weakest. Humility stoops to serve, welcome, and receive to Christ and in Christ's name.

How does this humility test work on you? Are you humble enough to meet people on their level? Can you receive and not despise the weak, the immature, the small? Do you stop them, turn away from them, fob them off on others? If you want to descend into greatness, then receive others – even if they are not in your group. Give a cup of cold water to another, be he beneath you or below you, or unlike you, for the sake of Christ. This is true greatness. I love Christ so much that I will stoop, and serve, and welcome the unlikely.

However, humility has a second aspect. Not only is humility willing to receive in Jesus name, but to be humble you must

II. Be Willing to Believe in Jesus' Name

Matthew 18:1-4 **Matthew 18:1** *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"* ² *Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them,* ³ *and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."* ⁴ *"Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

Not only are we to receive everyone, down to children, but we are to be *like* children, if we even want to be Christians. Once again, here is the secret to greatness – it is the humility of a little child.

Now we need to ask, what could Jesus mean? Because before we rush to say that children are pictures of purity and innocence (a myth started by the French sceptic Rousseau), common sense and experience tells us that this is not the case. Children can be very cruel and spiteful to one another. Children do not naturally serve others, they push to the front of the line, and say 'Me first' in loud voices. Children can be proud, and boastful, and supremely selfish.

So what does Jesus mean we are to imitate? Surely not the childishness, for childishness is something we want to outgrow. But there is a difference between *childish* and *childlike*. Childish is something negative. But to speak of something as childlike could be a compliment. To be childlike is to still be filled with wonder at the world, where you can repeat something again and again, but it still has a wonder. The world is very big, and you are very small and you are curious and fascinated by it. But perhaps the most amazing thing about being childlike is when you can believe something without being able to explain it. Tell a child we breathe invisible air, and they believe it – that's just how it is. Why do we stick to the Earth? Because of this thing called gravity. They accept it, believe it, even if they can't prove it or explain it.

It is only when we are older that we are taught to doubt, taught to distrust, to become sceptical, and demand proof, and say we won't believe it unless we see it.

This is the area Jesus calls for humility in. Unless we come down from our proud and lofty opinions of how much we know and how we know it, we will not enter the kingdom. If we proudly demand that God prove Himself to us, and submit to our experiments, and pass our tests, we are puffed up.

If we say that we will decide what God's Word must be like, and then submit the Bible to that test, we are proud. If we demand that God explain the Trinity to us with analogies we come up with, we are proud. If we tell God what the Gospel must be like, who it must save, how it must work to be fair, we are proud. We have not yet descended into the greatness of humility.

Now no one expects you to check your brain at the door when you believe. But in fact, children don't do that either. They ask you why, and why, and why, until you run out of reasons. But the thing about children is that when you get to the end, and you say "Because it just is" or "I don't know", they're OK with that. They'll still believe. We who sadly lose that childlikeness are too often looking for a reason not to believe and when we find something beyond us, supra-rational, inexplicable to human experience, then we take that escape hatch into unbelief. But that's pride in the driver's seat.

We don't often think of Jesus having faith. But our Lord is the author and finisher of our faith, and He showed this childlike trust in His Father throughout His ministry. He had submitted Himself entirely to the Father's will, and the Spirit's control, and that meant there were plenty of times when He had to simply trust, even if He didn't have all the reasons at the time. For example in the Garden, He prayed,

Mark 14:36 ³⁶ *And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."*

Matthew 26:42 ⁴² Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done."

Jesus is saying, I don't know why it must be this way. I don't know why it can't be another way. But I can trust in Your Person, Father, and submit to you. The childlike faith that says, I can't explain it, prove it, or control everything about it, but I trust the One who said it.

That's childlike faith. Descending into greatness. It's like receiving a child. It's like believing like a child. But it's also a third, and surprising thing. To be humble, we must:

III. Be Willing to Protect In Jesus' Name

⁴² *"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea."*

From receiving children, to being like children, Jesus now speaks about protecting them. And throughout this passage there is a dual meaning to little ones. Since believers are to become like children, fellow believers are also among the little ones.

And here Jesus says, if you are truly great, then you seek to protect these little ones from stumbling into sin. Jesus goes on to list dire penalties for causing children or other believers to stumble into sin. He said, it would be better for you to be drowned than for you to be culpable in someone else's falling into sin. It is better for you to be maimed and mutilated than to cause stumbling blocks for others, because the punishment for the one who deliberately and persistently leads others into sin and unbelief is hellfire.

What does this have to do with humility? Proud people always have a low view of sin and a high view of their own immunity to it and so they tend to be very neglectful of others. Their pride leads others to stumble. You will always find the proud person boasting in his supposed liberty, proclaiming what an independent thinker he is, not like those people. And so blind he is to the

power of temptation, so conceited he is in his own powers, that he waves, right under the noses of other Christians, temptations.

You find this in the man who tells you that he can watch films with all kinds of evil, because he's actually risen above it – those are not why he watches them, and so he leads the man who was in pornography to fall right back into it. This is the man who flaunts his liberty regarding eating and drinking, right in the presence of the man who just recently came out of a life of alcoholism and so cracks the door open again. This is the man who roundly criticises all he sees at church in the ears of his children, and then wonders why they are cynical and hard-hearted towards authority, and church, and Christ a few years later.

You see, arrogance makes you a bull in a china shop, trampling over consciences, re-opening old wounds, creating curiosity where there was none, opening doors to temptation. It all comes from the pride that does not think its own sin is dangerous, and imagines it has all the power in the world to overcome it.

By contrast, the humble heart quotes 1 Corinthians 10:24 to itself: “**1 Corinthians 10:12** ¹² *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.*”

The humble heart sees sin as poisonous, dangerous, deadly and infectious. And since the humble heart knows its own awful struggle with sin, in humble love for others, it has no desire to spread temptation. It has no desire to kindle fires that may burn for years in the bosom of another Christian. It does not even want to approach the possibility of seeing that child, or that Christian fall into sin, or perhaps walk away from the faith.

That's why again, being childlike is being childlike towards evil. “**Romans 16:19** *but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.*”

The man who knows the fallibility of his own heart treats others and their consciences with extreme care. The man who knows how easily he can fall does not throw things in the paths of others, and then boast that he himself happily skips over it.

No, the great ones, the ones descending into greatness, treat others as you would a newborn - great carefulness, great gentleness. Let them grow into godly convictions. Protect them from unnecessary temptation. Shelter them from influences that they are too young or too immature to handle. Protect them until they are strong enough to flee from temptation on their own. This is humility.

Dear citizens of heaven, and sojourners in Johannesburg, are you still climbing the world's ladder of pre-eminence and status? Have you even imported that into the church, jostling others for place, ignoring others, trampling over their consciences? Then see the image of a child. Are you willing to receive others, low as they might be? Are you willing to believe, even when you can't fully explain. Are you willing to protect others' consciences? This is how you descend into greatness in God's city.