

Discussions and arguments about Greatness

Jesus keeps travelling at this stage of His life. He is still avoiding Herod and the Pharisees ^{□1}. He gives His second prediction concerning His death and resurrection^{□2}, but the disciples do not understand^{□3}. There is actually a serious disagreement between Jesus and His disciples. They are convinced that He is being needlessly pessimistic in His predictions of death. They are afraid to ask questions because He is likely to be displeased. Once before Peter questioned Jesus' prediction of death and Jesus called him 'Satan'! Jesus was a friendly person and they could have asked Him for an explanation but they were fearful of what He would say.

□1 9:30
□2 9:31
□3 9:32

As they have been travelling they have been discussing greatness^{□1}. They would like to be important people in the coming kingdom of God. Despite Jesus' predictions of death they are convinced He is simply pessimistic and they are travelling to Jerusalem to set up a mighty and glorious kingdom which will drive away the Roman occupying power for ever!

□1 9:33-34

They do not want to admit that they have been arguing about greatness^{□1}. Many people would like to be 'great' in the eyes of others but they do not want to admit that they want greatness! It would be humiliating for them to admit that they want admiration from others.

□1 9:34

Whoever wants Greatness

Jesus takes the opportunity to teach them something about greatness in the kingdom of God. Greatness in the kingdom of God is unlike greatness in the world^{□1}. Greatness is being offered to us! It comes to individuals ('Whoever...'). It is a matter of what the person wants ('Whoever wishes...', 'Whoever wants...').

□1 9:35

• It involves Humiliation

1. **Greatness will involve being humiliated in some way.** '*Whoever wants to be first shall be last of all...*'. In some way God will work in that person's life and he will find himself being made to be '*last of all*'. Paul said he '*suffered the loss of all things*^{□1}. He had been deprived of everything that could make him boast. Greatness will involve refusal to boast in anything that men and women are proud of.

□1
Philippian s 3:8

• It involves Serving others

2. **Greatness will involve serving other people.** '*Whoever wants to be first shall be ... servant of all*'. It does not necessarily mean that other people tell you what to do, but it does mean that the way in which you live is dedicated to bringing blessing to others. No one is great without being 'servant of all'.

• It involves Sympathy for the powerless

3. **Greatness will involve sympathy for the powerless.** Jesus takes a child and gets him or her to stand in the middle of the people. He treats the child with great affection ^{□1}, and says '*Whoever welcomes one of these little children welcomes me...*'. Greatness will involve receiving children!

□1 9:36

Children are often neglected; they are a symbol of powerlessness. For a while they are often ignored. They are dependent on others. Greatness in the kingdom of God involves a welcoming attitude to those who are often despised and who are relatively powerless in society. No one is great who chooses only the high and mighty for his friends. No church is great that wants only the high and mighty as its members.

Greatness – more detail unfolded

Jesus begins to unfold what this means in detail.

• Involves freedom from rivalry

1. **Greatness will involve freedom from rivalry^{□1}.** The disciples heard of a person with a ministry of casting out demons. He was apparently a true follower of Jesus and he did his work in the name of Jesus. But he did not belong to the Twelve and their circles of disciples! It did not bother Jesus. He did not feel He had to be in control of everything that was happening in His name. He did not want the man stopped^{□2}. He might be a friend^{□3}. If his work was genuine he would be rewarded^{□4}.

□1 9:38-41
□2 9:39
□3 9:39-40
□4 9:41

• Avoids hurting others

2. **The 'great' Christian will avoid the danger of hurting others^{□1}.** It is better to lose one's life prematurely and painfully than to do damage to the people

of God. The true believer may suffer serious loss because of his or her carelessness in doing spiritual damage to others. Better to be drowned than to sin in such a way.

☰1
9:42

• Deals with serious hindrances to godliness

3. The 'great' Christian takes seriously the need to cut away serious hindrances to godliness. 'If your hand makes you to sin ... If your foot makes you sin ... cut it off... If your eye causes you to sin ... cut it out' (9:43, 45, 47; in 9:44 and 46 there is a textual corruption and those verses are omitted in accurate translations. The phrases come in verse 48 but scribes added them to verses 44 and 46).

These verses still continue the theme of 'greatness'. Another phrase that is used is 'enter the kingdom'. 'Enter the kingdom' does not mean 'take the first step in becoming a disciple'. Rather, the thought of Mark 9:33-37 is continuing. 'Enter the kingdom' means 'experience the blessings of God's kingly power working in our lives'. It is **more** than initial salvation. Hand and foot and eye stand for things in our lives that are very precious to us but are doing damage to our experience of the kingdom.

Being 'thrown into hell' refers in **this** passage to salvation through fire (as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 3:15), where the fire of God seriously deprives the believer of his reward if he has lived a rebelliously inconsistent life.

• Takes seriously the threat of fiery punishment

4. The 'great' Christian takes seriously the threat of fiery punishment ☰1. The warning about 'hell' or about Gehenna is not necessarily a warning of eternal punishment in this passage. 'Gehenna' was a term which was used in the first century AD of fiery chastening from God as well as eternal punishment. 'Gehenna' can be used of being 'saved through fire', as well as of a punishment which will never be reversed.¹ Obviously a sentence like 'Everyone will be salted with fire' ☰2 has more to do with purification than with irreversible punishment.

☰1
9:48

☰2
9:49



• Perseveres in the life of love and purity

5. The 'great' Christian takes seriously the need to persevere in the life of love and purity. The thread of thought leads Jesus to playfully juggle around the picture-language of the word 'salt'. He uses the same word to make a different point: the salt-like character of the Christian might be lost☰1. In which case the Christian can expect to be 'salted' – purified – by fire. It can happen by God's chastening in this life. There is reason to believe it can come after the day of judgement also.

☰1
9:50a

The 'great' Christian takes seriously the need of love. Yet another use of the word 'salt' is used in verse 50b. Jesus' playing with words continues. Here the word 'salt' is used to refer to good relationships within the fellowship of the Christian.

Endnote 1 See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 657-658, for the evidence. The use of 'undying worm' and an 'unquenchable' fire in a context of being saved through fire suggests that these terms may speak of a punishment that is unending until its work is done.

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