

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” ³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “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.” (Mark 9:30-37 NIV2011)

Servant of All

Everyone is searching for meaning and purpose in life. Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? Where am I going? Your answer to these questions define who you are. They are soul-searching questions that reveal your motivation in life. Whether you’ve actually asked those questions or not, you’ve wrestled with them. Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? Where am I going?

As we travel with Jesus and his disciples through the country side of Galilee it’s the opportune time for asking such questions. Jesus pulls himself and his disciples away from the busy crowds and miracle working to teach them: **“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise”** (v.31).

But the disciples don’t get it. At the same time, they are too afraid to ask. So they just keep on going until they reach the town of Capernaum. Once there Jesus asks them: **“What were you arguing about on the road?”** Along the way they weren’t asking any clarifying questions from Jesus, but there seems to be some heated discussion. And Jesus knows it. Sadly, this wouldn’t be the last time the disciples get caught up arguing and fighting over who is the greatest.

Who’s the greatest? We’re still arguing about that today. Human beings have a desire to be great, part of something great, part of something greater than themselves. So we hear the meaning and purpose in life is to do your best to achieve your goals and be the greatest you can be. At the very least you can be great in your own eyes. If that lines up with what enough people say are good and proper goals, even better. But in order to reach that point you need to do what needs to get done. We are assured that the ends will justify the means you use to achieve it. Some people might have to be put down along the way. Sacrifices have to be made with relationships. But if you can sit on top realizing and living your dreams, it’s supposed to be worth it.

But who gets to decide who is the greatest? Even in a world that tries so hard to make sure that everyone wins, there's the constant fight of who actually is winning more. If someone claims to be the greatest, plenty of others are trying to prove how they are not. Arguments come up because of questionable practices. Broken relationships show the flaws of the individual. People decide that the ends did not justify the means. So what if good things came from it, look at all the bad stuff the person did...erase them. The cause they are fighting for isn't the right one, so they can't be the greatest either. Even when it comes to suffering, the marginalized, the victim there's seems to a competition for the greatest sufferer and who has it the worst! Who's right? Who's greatest?

It's not like we are at recess on the playground trying to figure out who is the fastest, strongest, or smartest. We know daily life isn't about who gets the gold star for the day. I know plenty of moms and dads who have coffee mugs that have the same claim of #1 mom or greatest dad. In the end, does it matter who makes the claim? Truthfully you might not have interest in being the greatest either. But we do want to be greater than someone else even if it is just a little bit. Maybe you don't want to be the leader, but you want your opinion and idea to be heard more than them. We don't want to be greedy or ask too much, but we want to be able to keep up with the neighbors, colleagues, and friends. In a world of Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter we have almost constant and instant updates to test where we stand. No, we don't want to be the greatest. That would be too gaudy, pretentious, and stuck up. But just a little bit better or, at the very least, the same. Have enough stuff in the house. Have the right decorations for the home. Have enough saved up. Give the kids just the right amount of experiences at just the right times in life. Have the right amount of acres and animals. Have the right amount of family, children, grandchildren, who support and love you. Achieve the right goals at the right time. But to have that means we find ourselves running here to get that taken care, get back over there to make sure you are filling those responsibilities, then quickly get over there to make sure you are living up to that personal standard you have set for yourself. Yeah, you know you are neglecting some responsibilities, but at least I'm a hard worker, a caring person, I'm putting other people before myself. Notice what we conveniently leave unsaid...at least I'm a harder worker than them. And we do it because as long as we can tell ourselves we are a little better than someone else, it helps us to not have deal with our own inadequacies and faults.

And then what happens? Arguments come up because you feel are sacrificing more than they are. You feel taken advantage of because no one recognizes your efforts. You feel validated in your actions because look at everything you've had to deal with so far. Maybe you achieve those life goals and dreams, but now what? Or you don't and you don't feel better or greater, now what? We wonder: who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? Where am I going? We get caught up in this rat race of just trying to survive, to prove at least to myself I'm a little greater than someone else, and for what? It doesn't last. It fades. It spoils. It's forgotten. We die.

Maybe that's why the disciples were afraid to have Jesus clarify what he was saying. It forced them to see the reality that if even Jesus was going to suffer and die, that's ultimately what they would face too. So they argue about who is the greatest because why else are we here if not to get ahead in this world?

Jesus calls the Twelve to him for some more teaching. **“Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”** It's not about trying to be greater, but to be servant of all. It's the exact opposite of how this world operates. So much service is done in the name of serving yourself. It's done because we are trying to get something out of it. It makes us feel better ourselves. It feels good. It impresses the right people. It achieves a personal goal. It lives up to a standard that we set for ourselves. It fits into our way of thinking. It's all turned inward. But Jesus is pretty clear: look outside of yourself. You must be servant of all. But Jesus, what about me? If I'm serving others and I'm last, what about me? When will it be my time? We've heard it: you need to look out for yourself otherwise people are going to run all over you, taken advantage of you, you aren't going to get anywhere! Look out for yourself because no one else will. What about me?

Jesus answers that by bringing over a child, hugging her letting her know it's going to be okay, and says, **“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.”** Serve others the way you would welcome a child. It's not about doing everything they want, but love them, welcome them without any expectations from them, personal promotion, self-gain. There's no one more selfish than a baby. They take and take and take. You give and give and give some more. They are often ungrateful for the food you offer. They scream and cry when they are a little bit uncomfortable. If they aren't receiving enough attention, they will let everyone know about it. Sometimes they reward you with a little smile or wave; more often it's less. And still you love them and serve them. And as they get older, sure, they might be able to help out a little bit around the house, but it doesn't come close to what you have to do for them. They are still ungrateful, unthankful, demanding, and frustrating only in different ways. And still you welcome them and love them. For parents, you know how hard that can be for your own children. It's even more difficult for someone who isn't your own child. And, yet, that's how we are to serve all. Not looking for something from them. Not expecting a repayment. It's not serving to show you are the greatest at anything. It's simply to love them.

After all, that's what Jesus has done for me. He comes down to me at my level and receives me the selfish, self-seeking, self-justifying, ungrateful, demanding person that I am and he serves me. He serves you. He would not allow himself to be caught up in the rat race of this world of trying to be the greatest. No, his purpose and meaning in life was to save you. That's why he is here. He came to be betrayed by one he loved so that you would be welcomed into God's presence. He suffers so that your suffering would have an end date and you have something far greater than anything in this world waiting for you. He allows himself to be killed so that your

life on this earth is not the end for you. He selflessly gives up his life to pay for our selfish, self-seeking, self-serving sins. His precious blood pays for every single one of them. This serving, suffering, and dying wasn't for his own benefit. He wasn't trying to prove anything to himself. He didn't need to try and impress the Father—he already knew the Father was well-pleased with him. Even after his Father had turned his back on him, Jesus trusted God's promise. He commits his soul to his Father's hands resting in the Father's faithfulness that in three days he would be raised to life again. And he does. And he is. Therefore, we have a living hope. Like that child in Mark, Jesus receives you into his arms. He wraps you in a warm hug in the waters of baptism and brings you close to him. Who are you? A baptized dearly loved child of God. Your status before God is sealed to you and guaranteed in Jesus' selfless love. Jesus receives you at his Holy Supper where he feeds you his body and blood assuring you of that promise again—it hasn't changed. He receives you as he whispers into your ears and fills up your heart with His Word. In Jesus, you are set free from sin, free from this body of death, free from this world of trying to get ahead. You are right with God. For Jesus' sake, you are great in God's sight. And that's all that matters.

So, who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? Where am I going? One day, according to his perfect wisdom and goodness, your Father in heaven will call you from this world to be with him. Because Jesus lives, you too shall live. Until then, we live in faith to God's glory and service all. That's your purpose. That's why we are here. What about me and my time? Don't worry; he's got this. Rest in your Father's hand. He always sends us more people who love us and take care of us than we are able to love and serve. Our God truly is gracious. With heaven already ours, already having a right standing with God, what else is there to do? You are set free to serve. At different stages in your life it's going to look different for different people. Whatever place you are in right now God has placed people in your life for us to love and serve and who in turn love and serve us. And when you serve, it's not just that person you are serving and loving, but the Father himself who sent Jesus to save us. There's no higher honor. So, go be free and serve all. Amen.