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Following Jesus Means... New Ambitions

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TEXT: Mark 9:30-37 (ESV)

They 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.

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."

Dear friends,

We do a lot of following in our lives. For instance, we follow people on Instagram and Twitter, or we follow our gut instincts sometimes. We talk of following the news. We follow recipes when we cook. We follow all kinds of things, don't we? Millions of people have discovered that the most important following a person can do is to follow Jesus Christ. He knows what makes our lives work best. After all, he calls himself the way, the truth, and the life. So how does one follow Jesus in 2021? Well, first, we place our trust in him, don't we, and what he's done for us. But we also then follow him in

God's word, the Bible. And there Jesus teaches us the way citizens of his kingdom are to live. And then we obediently put his word to work in our lives. That's real following.

Well, today we have another passage on how to operate as a devoted follower of Christ. In last week's reading, Jesus announced his upcoming suffering and death and resurrection to his disciples, and they didn't understand him, and he set them straight. Now we see him doing that same thing again today. He actually will announce his passion three times. And each time the disciples failed to comprehend what he's talking about. And then he'd sit them down and teach them about what is involved in following him. Well, in today's passage, it begins by telling them he's going to be delivered into the hands of men and they'll kill him. Who's going to deliver him? God. Now, why? To achieve the atonement for sin that had been in the planning since the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, and the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to the nations of the world. The disciples didn't understand Jesus, and they were afraid to ask him about this. Maybe they were afraid because of the rebuke that Peter had received earlier on from Jesus. Or perhaps they were afraid because they were in denial. They didn't want to know more or even think about these kinds of things.

It appears that they were having their own discussion along the way after this prediction as they tagged along behind Jesus. I wonder what that looked like. Jesus is out in front, quite a ways, and they're talking. Was it a heated discussion or just a group of guys walking along seriously or just shooting the breeze, laughing at each other now and then? Well, when they got the Capernaum and entered a house where they were to stay Jesus and asked them, "What were you talking about on the way here?" His question was met with an embarrassed silence because, you see, they were arguing with one another about who was the greatest among them. Can you believe it? After hearing his dire passion prediction, they are still carrying on with their own plans and agenda, establishing a pecking order amongst themselves, going back and forth about who would have the highest status among them, and authority. Of course, Jesus knew all along what they were discussing. He didn't make them tell him, but he did sit down and addressed it in his teaching. I picture Jesus sighing to himself as he sat down, which signaled it's time for a teaching moment. And he motioned them to come and listen, and he said to them, "If anyone would be first, you must be the last of all, the servant of all." He turned their thinking and the world's thinking on its head in regards to what's important when it comes to greatness and status and power. In fact, Jesus is speaking to

their ambitions and sublimating those ambitions for himself, recreating them. In place of the ambition to rule, as they were after, he substituted the ambition to serve. In place of the ambition to have things done for them, he substituted the ambition to do things for others – “Chase after that,” he says. If you want to be first, be the last of all, a servant of all. Humble yourself. Instead of “me first,” it’s a you-first attitude, is what counts in my eyes, Jesus says. Instead of longing to be master of all, it’s a longing to be a servant of all. Asking the question, “What can I do to help those around me to be all that God intended them to be?” He was teaching them to think the things of God, which are so different from our own human thinking.

To drive his point home with them, he used a live illustration. There must have been a child wandering through the room when he was speaking because Jesus called the boy over and put him in the midst of the group and lovingly put his arms around the boy. Kind of a sign of nurture. And he says to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name,” (in my name meaning out of obedience to me,) “receives me. And whoever receives me receives not only me, but him,” (meaning God,) “who sent me.” Why did he grab that child? Because children lacked status in that society, they were needy. They were to be seen and not heard. They were not influencers who couldn’t pay one back if you did anything for them. To serve them was non-transactional. You get nothing back. It goes unnoticed. There’s no applause. And Jesus seems to be saying here, greatness is about taking on lowly, unnoticed tasks and caring for those who have little to no status in the world. And to do that is to be in fellowship with Jesus.

When you think about it, following Jesus like this is basically walking in his footsteps. I mean, he is our servant king who humbled himself to serve a sinful humanity that was totally incapable and helpless when it came to saving ourselves from sin and death and the power of the devil, and having a right relationship with God. And yet he served us anyway, took on the form of a servant to become one of us and went to the cross.

Following Jesus, then, means taking on new ambitions to be humble servants to all. Christian author Chuck Swindoll writes in his book, *Improving Your Serve*, these words:

Lots of philosophies are floating around. And most of them are more confusing than they are helpful. Most of them end up focusing full attention on the individual. Just consider a few of them. Greece said be wise. You know yourself. Rome said, be strong. Discipline yourself. Religion says be good, conform yourself. Epicureanism says be sensuous. Enjoy yourself. Education says be resourceful. Expand yourself. Psychology says, be confident. Assert yourself.

Materialism says, be satisfied. Please yourself. Pride says, be superior. Promote yourself. Humanism says, be capable. Believe in yourself. Yourself, yourself, yourself. All of these are about doing something with and to yourself and for yourself. But Jesus says be a servant, humbly give to others. Put others first and be a servant of all. And that, my friend, is easier said than done.

And why is that? Because, number one, our sinful nature to look out for ourselves first stands in the way. We're wired to look out for number one. We like people to wait on us. We don't want to be waiters. We want to be waited upon. And serving others can sometimes be so inconvenient and distasteful and hard and unglamorous and sometimes thankless. In a survey that was done a while back, the number one answer as to why it was so difficult for people to serve people, the answer was: people. People make it hard. I think it was Pastor Gordon Macdonald, who once said, "You can tell whether you're becoming a servant by how you act when people treat you like one." And notice those words Jesus said: "To all." Did you catch that – all? Even the lowliest person, the marginalized, the difficult, the unlikable, the difficult. Even our enemies. Even those who have different values than us or different religion. Let's not kid ourselves: if we really take Jesus at his word this is challenging stuff that he's telling us. Listen to the confession of author Mark Roberts. He says,

I find it easy to pay lip service to the call of Jesus to servanthood. But honestly, I'm not all that keen on actually serving. When one of my children wakes up in the middle of the night with a stomach ache, my first thought is not "Great! What a marvelous opportunity to serve one I love." But it's, "I wonder if my wife will get up first." Or when a friend needs some help moving furniture, I don't find it natural to offer my back that usually get so easily tweaked as a living sacrifice. True servanthood involves hard work. Jesus, like servanthood, rarely earns accolades or other worldly compensations, surely. I know Mother Teresa became world famous, but who can name any other name in her order? They serve in obscurity, right?

Well, I understand how Roberts feels. I have those same struggles. So does Christian poet Ruth Harms Calkin. She wrote this poem contemplating the difficulty of Christ-like serving. She says,

You know, Lord, how I serve you with great emotional fervor in the limelight. You know how eagerly I speak for you at a woman's club. You know how I effervesce when I promote a fellowship group. You know my genuine

enthusiasm at a Bible study. But how would I react, I wonder if you pointed to a basin of water and asked me to wash the calloused feet of a bent and wrinkled old woman day after day, month after month, in a room where nobody saw and nobody knew.

Wow. So we oftentimes balk at putting others first and serving them, don't we? It's a challenge, but yet that is what Jesus calls us to do as his followers. That's his way.

So how does one get past selfish inclinations? How can I move beyond my hesitancy to serve others and not put myself first? Well, I think Jesus has helped us out here with a very motivating statement at the end of this episode when he says, "Whoever receives somebody like this child with no status who's helpless and in need, receives me. And whoever receives me is receiving him who sent me, God." Did you catch that? You're receiving Jesus, God himself, when you receive and serve others in his name. I'm reminded of Matthew 25, where the king says in Jesus' parable, "I was hungry, you fed me. Thirsty, you gave me a drink. A stranger, and you welcomed me. Naked, and you clothed me. In prison, and you visited me. As you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me." John Stott, one of my favorite authors, wrote this helpful insight about serving others and this truth we just heard, as if they were Jesus. Listen to these words.

A servant girl who was once asked how she knew she was a converted Christian replied, "Well, you see, I used to put the dust under, sweep the dust under the mat, but now I don't." It is possible to visit someone else as if Jesus were there, to type a letter as if Jesus were going to read it, to serve a customer as if Jesus had come shopping that day, and to nurse a patient as if Jesus were in that hospital bed, and it is possible to cook a meal as if we were Martha in the kitchen and Jesus was going to eat it.

How true. And also, by the way, keep in mind that as you take this pathway of servanthood, you're not on your own in being a servant to all as a Christ follower. You have his spirit in you, producing that fruit of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness. And you had the spirit empowering you, shaping your heart and your mind to think and to love like Jesus. And you also had the great resource of prayer. Mother Teresa, great servant, right? She had this prayer that that she used each day. "Oh, Jesus. Grant that even if you are hidden under the unattractive disguise of anger or crime or of madness, I may recognize you and say, 'Jesus, you who suffer. How sweet it is to serve you.'" Isn't that a great prayer petition for us to use as we begin each day? Help us to see Jesus in others.

I came across this wonderful story a couple of years ago about a woman named Toni who is in the home building industry called Habitat for Humanity. Several years ago, she tells a story that she was responsible for a major project in the Atlanta area. It's a particularly demanding undertaking because the goal was to build several homes in a very short time period. Hundreds of volunteers worked from sun up way past sundown in order to finish the project. Even former President Jimmy Carter lent a hand to this, as he often does, with Habitat for Humanity projects. Yet for all of their valiant efforts, the volunteers were beginning to fall behind schedule. Late one night, Toni received a call from one of the watchmen. "You'd better get down to the project fast," he said. "Something odd is going on down there." Throwing on her clothes, she rushed down to the site, nervous about what she might find. When she arrived, she noticed that one of the partially built homes was lit from the inside and someone was in there. As Toni approached the structure, she noticed a couple of men standing outside and she recognized them as ones she had seen earlier that day. "Is he in there?" Toni asked the men. "Yes," was their clipped answer. Upon entry, Toni found President Carter diligently working on the bathroom plumbing. "Why are you here so late, Mr. President?" she asked. "It's the middle of the night, for goodness' sake." "Well," he explained, "I knew that we hadn't finished plumbing this bathroom and that it had to be finished by tomorrow because we have a team of volunteers arriving in just a few hours. And I didn't want them to have nothing to do. So, I figured I'd sneak down and finish up before the team arrived." Here is a man who was once the most powerful man in the world, plumbing a bathroom in the middle of the night. Nobody was supposed to find out. There were no photo opportunities here, no occasion for the world to admire the servanthood of a former president. This late-night plumber was not seeking to augment his glory, but simply to serve others as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is looking for ambitious servants. So how about you? Opportunities abound. You can serve your spouse, or you can help build houses for the poor. You can teach a Sunday school class or help immigrants learn to read English. Or feed the hungry, help them to receive vocational training. Or you can regularly visit someone who's in a nursing home or in a jail. And what's our motivation? Not personal glory or even for gratitude from those we serve, we're motivated by Jesus, the suffering servant of God, who gave himself for us to make us his own, who says, "Whoever receives one of the least of these receives me." Amen.