

"First Things First" – Pr Jim Sprengle – Pentecost 17 – September 19, 2021

- I. **Mark 9:35** – 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."
- II. **The quest to be somebody...**
 - a. When a person says, "I just want to be somebody," it can mean different things.
 - i. For some people, it might be the desire to excel and succeed
 - ii. Others see it as a way to stand out and be different than others
 - iii. But for most people, "being somebody" means they want to be important, or to have recognition and status.
 - b. No matter how far we go back in history, the story is the same... as people try to carve out their little piece of making a name for themselves.
 - i. I guess that is where it all started, with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.
 - ii. The first sin ever was because Eve wanted more... more knowledge
 - iii. She broke the only rule God had in that perfect setting, and she ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
 - iv. Out of that selfish and sinful act, the door was opened for all kinds of pride and arrogance.
 - c. Just think about Noah and his family, as God flooded the earth to start again from all the evil in the world.
 - i. They settle in the valley of Shinar and Genesis 11 explains that Noah's offspring said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth," (Genesis 11:4).
 - ii. God started over only to have people go right back to the pride and arrogance that caused total destruction.
 - iii. So God changes up their language, and they cannot complete their Tower of Babel – and they could not make a name for themselves.
 - d. The sin and brokenness that infected those first people has been passed down for generations, and we are living in our own valley of Shinar.
 - i. Look at the people and things that make someone "somebody" in our culture...
 1. Lots of money – with wealth comes status and importance
 2. Talent – when people are the best in sports, music, whatever they do – the world puts them on a pedestal
 3. Appearance – if a person is beautiful on the outside, they are given special privileges and others copy their looks and fashion
 4. Careers – the average worker in America is not a CEO or real estate mogul, and they are held in esteem

- ii. The reality is that none of these things are inherently bad or evil, it's the focus!
 - 1. Are we focused on being relevant, rich, better than, or important?
 - 2. Are we focused on God and the wonderful gifts He gives?
 - a. Do we see our status as tied to God and His name rather than our own work and self-centered motives?
 - e. I doubt that any of you are sitting here today with aspirations of world domination or to be the most famous person ever...
 - i. But even in the Christian, we have a tinge of pride that makes us try to one up the other guy.
 - 1. Some of us try to throw around our Bible knowledge to make others feel less than
 - 2. I've seen Christians act in righteous and pious ways to make others feel bad rather than doing it for God!
 - 3. In Christian circles, I see lots of prideful behavior in promoting books, having the most members at a church, and being influential in the name of Jesus (but the people are the real focus instead of Jesus).
 - ii. As God's servants, the biggest battles we face are with pride and selfishness... the desire to be first.
 - 1. We have egos that want attention... we want that pat on the back and recognition for being "somebody"...
 - 2. We need to feel lots of affirmation and approval, or we can get down in the dumps... or even resentful.
 - 3. Servanthood is a constant struggle with all this selfishness under the surface.
- III. **Jesus is trying to focus His disciples on servanthood.**
- a. As I said last week, Jesus had come down from the Mount of Transfiguration where He showed Peter, James and John His divinity.
 - b. They come down the mountain to a big ruckus as the disciples were trying to get a demon out of a boy, except they were not placing their trust in Jesus, but their own power.
 - c. Now, in our reading today, Jesus tells them for the second time that He will die a horrible death, only to rise again...
 - i. He is trying to tell them what's coming soon
 - ii. He is trying to get them to see His actions and willingness to serve
 - d. On their journey, they began to argue amongst themselves about who was the greatest (vs 34) only to be called out on it by Jesus when they got to Capernaum.
 - e. How did they respond by the way? Silence (vs 34)
 - i. Silence is the opposite of pride usually – because their pride had turned to shame.

- f. Jesus says that greatness is a servant and taking the last place (vs 35)
- g. So Jesus takes someone with the lowest status in society and holds the little guy up to give an example...
 - i. You see, children in those days were the least... they were not the delightful, wonderful blessing as we see them today.
 - 1. I read that children were always the first to get sick, the ones who died first, and while they were minors, "on par with slaves"¹
 - ii. Here, as an example to the prideful disciples, Jesus holds up a child and says that serving and welcoming someone as low as this will bring glory to God.
 - iii. The disciples could not stoop much lower to serve and welcome someone – and that's the point.
- h. God always has a way of turning things upside down, and our hopes and dreams of being important and recognized are completely changed.
 - i. Jesus says that we are not the first thing, but God, then others, *then us*.
 - ii. In other words, first things first.
 - iii. As we see the world and our part in it through that lens, we are better able to set aside our own ego and pride to serve others in love.

IV. Jesus is that servant of love.

- a. He wants so much for His disciples to see what it will take for God to redeem them... He wants so much for us to see the sacrifice that meant pouring out His life on our behalf.
- b. Hear again the words of Philippians 2:5-8 - "⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."
- c. Jesus went to the cross as the ultimate servant – and rose again in power and glory to make us "somebody"
- d. There is no one too low... too poor... too sinful for Jesus and His servanthood... and we receive the best gift from His work – that we are called "children of God." (1 John 3:1)

V. Certainly, use God's gifts, talents and abilities to be somebody...

- a. We are not called to be less than as God's children, we are called to use our gifts to bring glory to God!
- b. But always remember, first things first...
 - i. Jesus
 - ii. Others
 - iii. You
- c. Which, when you think about it, J.O.Y. spells joy.

- d. Nothing is better in life than putting first things first, because that is the only way to live a meaningful life and a joy-filled life. Amen.

¹ Voelz, J. W., & Mitchell, C. W. (2019). *Mark 8:27–16:20*. (C. P. Giese, Ed.) (p. 703). Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.