

# Magarey Lectures 2016

## Bible Studies by Greg Elsdon

### Jesus and his Disciples at Cross Purposes

#### STUDY THREE: Mark 9:30-41; 10:17-22

#### Redefining 'Greatness'



#### Mark 9:30-41

9:30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. 33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." 38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Once again the disciples fail to comprehend what Jesus is saying to them plainly (see 8:32). Mark reveals that they were afraid to ask for clarification. Was this because they did not wish to appear ignorant? Or was their fear motivated by the fact that they had already heard enough to know that they did not want to know any more? **Do we really want to hear this stuff?** They had another agenda they would prefer to discuss. Rather than listen to words of suffering and death, they were eager to decide amongst themselves who was the greatest (9:33-34). They may have begun to 'see', but their vision remained distorted and deceptive.

In response to their obvious addiction to power Jesus takes them aside and informs them that true greatness will only be found by those who learn how to live as **servants** of others. This radical reversal of the norm lies at the very heart of Jesus' message about the Reign of God. It needs to be seen along side the equally disturbing call previously issued by Jesus: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (8:34)

"Not only do the disciples not understand, but again they show that they are not prepared to accept the messiahship, the kingdom and the discipleship that these words of Jesus demand. They are on their way to Capernaum, and when they arrive there and are settled for the night, Jesus asks them what they were discussing along the way. Their reaction shows that they have not gone beyond the hopes expressed in Peter's confession (8:27-33). They are still thinking in terms of human achievement" "they

were all silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest" (9:34). Their interest is in who will have most authority in the human power structure that they imagine Jesus intends to establish. Again Jesus does not leave them in their ignorance. He takes the matter up with them, and tells them that to follow him means to abandon all human ambitions of power and authority: 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all' (9:35)." **(Frank Moloney)**

The logic of this section shifts somewhat in turning focus from the need for the disciples to be servants of all, to the announcement that the presence of God is experienced in the welcoming and acceptance of those without rights – the little people. After announcing Jesus' striking reversal of what is perceived as reality Mark portrays Jesus placing a child in their midst and declaring that whoever receives or welcomes a child is actually welcoming or receiving Jesus himself. If that's not more than enough to cope with, the issue is pushed further to declare that it is God (him)self who is encountered when people open the boundaries of their community life to those who are not normally considered to possess what is required to belong. The critical question here is; what, or who, does Jesus intend us to see in the figure of the child? Innocence? Humility? Or is it, perhaps, powerlessness and lack of access?

"For Jesus, the kingdom of God belongs especially to the poor, the powerless, the outcasts, the dis-possessed, those who have no standing within the community. Those who count for nothing in the eyes of men are the very ones to whom the Kingdom of God is promised, for they come empty handed, with no power or position of their own. Their only hope is in God." **[Athol Gill]**

Throughout history the Church has sought to establish itself as a centre of power, able to influence the shape of society. Here Jesus appears to be suggesting that rather than seeking to establish its own power, the Christian church ought to be involved in the process of redistributing power to those ordinarily excluded. In Jesus' teaching the Kingdom of God has a special preference for and place for the poor and powerless who count for nothing in the normal run of things.



"The church is not to be a powerbase for its members but a community that redistributes power to the excluded." **[Ched Myers]**

**What would it take for powerful people to embrace the powerless and reconstruct their communities as places where outsiders are welcome?**

The disciple named John immediately demonstrates the depth of the disciples' resistance to Jesus' alternative Kingdom, this time by seeking to control who can, or who cannot, be involved in this life-giving work of the Reign of God (9:36-41). "Whoever is not against us is for us", responds Jesus. How seriously has this teaching of Jesus ever been taken in the history of the Church? Obsessed with the need to delineate boundaries, control entrance and exit, and seek security (salvation?) in protectionist and self-serving identity markers, we have all too frequently been 'blind' to the grace of God breaking out all around us. Like the disciples in this passage, we too have been quick to denounce the value and legitimacy of things we have not initiated or over which we do not have control.

What does Mark's Jesus have to say to us? **"Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to soon afterward to speak evil of me."**

### **Mark 10:17-22**

Mk 10:17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" 20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

The journey from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, and from blindness to sight, continues (see 8:27; 9:33; 9:34; 10:17; 10:32; 10:52). A young man kneels in respect before Jesus addressing him as 'Good Teacher' and asks "What must I do to inherit eternal life". ['Eternal life' is found infrequently in the Synoptic Gospels. Exactly what this young man meant by it is uncertain. But whatever he understood by the term he was obviously looking for something more in life.] Jesus' response to the man's question is intriguing. He immediately redirects attention away from himself to God and reminds him of what he already knew. Jesus has no new instructions for this seeker, and he, in turn, replies that he has been committed to keeping these commandments all his life.

Jesus is clearly drawn to this young man (10:21) who has demonstrated his desire to do what is right according to the law. The young man's response indicates that he is looking for something more. As a wealthy man he is accustomed to being able to acquire what he wants. Jesus' response implies that if the man has not been able to find what he is looking for in life by keeping God's life-commandments, then maybe he needs to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and **follow him**.

Jesus' intention is not simply for the man divest himself of all his possessions. It was to free him up – to enable him to follow Jesus. The young man wanted more in life than could be obtained by keeping the law. Jesus offered him the opportunity to find that

something more (eternal life) in his company. But he knew full well that this would not be possible unless the man was prepared to relinquish the wealth that restricted his freedom to explore God's unpredictable kingdom.

Mark uses this story to teach his readers about the difficulty of following Jesus when they are 'weighed down' by their commitment to acquiring and maintaining wealth. This rich young man needed to release himself from the bondage of his wealth if he was going to be free to follow Jesus and discover the 'something more' he longed for. In the following verses the disciples express their dismay at what they had just heard and Jesus assures them that those who have left everything to follow him will be rewarded beyond measure – in this world and beyond.

"All Christians should think seriously about their stewardship of money and material possessions. Resisting the pressures of a consumer culture, which generates perpetual needs for more and newer possessions, is difficult for many Christians today. Our excess consumption may deprive others of resources they need just to survive. It is a hidden form of structural greed that wastes the world's resources and creates suffering for others we may never meet." **(Pheme Perkins)**

### the dirty dozen ?

