

Great Exhortations

Mark 9:30-37 February 4, 2026

Do you have what it takes to be victorious at the ISSA Show? It is billed as “the world’s largest and most influential event” in its category.¹ It’s a “powerful platform” to showcase your greatness and help change the way the world views the people of this particular industry.² You’ll have to compete against other top teams but standout participants will be featured across industry media and recognized in front of their peers. If your team is the greatest, you will receive “unmatched reach,” and “premiere exposure,” and “global visibility” according to the official website.

Who wants in? Oh, what *is* the event I’m talking about? It’s the Housekeeping Olympics. Contests include bed-making races, vacuum relays, and mop-bucket sprints. For 35 years, thousands of service industry professionals have competed to determine who truly is the greatest among them.

What makes a person great in God’s eyes and in His Kingdom? This is the topic of our verses tonight. They’re straightforward, but also vital for our perspective as believers and disciples.

Mark 9:30 - ³⁰ Then they left that place and made their way through Galilee, but he did not want anyone to know it.

Jesus and His followers have been up north in Caesarea Philippi, but now head south through Galilee on their way to Judea, Jerusalem, and Golgotha. Jesus wants to move without being noticed. When it says they made their way *through* Galilee, it’s not to stop from place to place, but to *bypass* the towns and villages.³ His public ministry was coming to an end.⁴ And He wanted to spend concentrated time instructing the disciples.

Mark 9:31 - ³¹ For he was teaching his disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after he is killed, he will rise three days later.”

Jesus makes three predictions like this in the Gospel of Mark. The first was in chapter 8 where He then had to rebuke Peter. The third will be in chapter 10. None of what happened was a surprise to Jesus. This is why He came - to give His life as a ransom for many.

But here He provides a new detail: He would be *betrayed*. Not that He would be ambushed by hidden enemies, but handed over by a follower - a *friend*. *Who* would it be? Jesus had more than 12 followers, but the group as big as it had been - not after the so-called “hard sayings of Jesus” which resulted in many people turning back and following Him no more.

¹ <https://www.issa.com/housekeeping-olympics/>

² <https://www.issa.com/industry-news/ieha-announces-35th-annual-housekeeping-olympics-with-expanded-healthcare-sector-participation/>

³ Marvin Vincent *Word Studies In The New Testament*

⁴ David Garland *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*

Mark 9:32 - ³² But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask him.

They should've known the betrayer was, indeed, one of the 12, because *when* many followers turned away, Jesus said to them, "Do you guys want to leave, too?" They said no, and then Jesus said, "One of you is a devil."⁵ But they didn't follow up with, "Lord, is it I?" At least not yet.

The whole discussion and *idea* of a slain Messiah left them distressed and afraid. How could the Son of Man die? There in verse 31, Jesus once again identifies Himself as the Son of Man. But Daniel says the Son of Man is given an everlasting domain ruling over every people, every language, every nation. The Son of Man's Kingdom *cannot* be destroyed.⁶ So how could *He* die?

And maybe they kept quiet because they remembered what happened the *last* time Jesus made this prediction and one of them responded. Now, Peter responded poorly - *rebuking* Jesus and telling Him to stop talking - but even so, they probably weren't too keen on piping up.

On top of all that, the *full* understanding of these things was still hidden from them.⁷ It was *after* the resurrection that they would finally have their minds *fully* opened to understand the Scriptures.⁸

Now, we have the indwelling Holy Spirit to help us understand these things. The 12 did *not* in Mark 9. But even post-Pentecost, we recognize that there *are* limitations to our knowledge and apprehension. But we remind ourselves and comfort ourselves with the truth that the Holy Spirit is given to counsel us and testify the truth to us and give us right spiritual vision.

Christians *must* have a healthy, growing relationship with God the Holy Spirit. His interactions with us are never going to contradict the Scriptures, but if we don't have communion with Him, we can't fully comprehend the Word of God. *Intellectual* growth is not sufficient on its own. We must also receive the Holy Spirit, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and be taught by the Holy Spirit.⁹

Mark 9:33 - ³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

When Jesus taught them about His betrayal and death, they were silent. But apparently, after a while, they started talking with each other. More than *talking*, they started *arguing* with each other. And though Jesus knew *exactly* what it was about, He takes this the opportunity later in the day to say, "Hey guys - What were you debating while we were on our walk?"

Jesus has such a patient compassion for us. He's going to use this to teach them something super important, but can you imagine this moment? It's downright humorous. We *could* imagine Him asking with severity, but does it come off that way? "What were you guys talking about?"

⁵ John 6:66-70

⁶ Daniel 7:13-14

⁷ Luke 9:45

⁸ Luke 24:45

⁹ Acts 19:2, Ephesians 5:18, John 14:26

There was a *lot* for them to talk about: Jesus' impending *death*. What that might mean for *them*. What they should do about it. *Which* of them might be the betrayer. The implications of the resurrection. But instead of *all* those things, *this* is what they had been arguing:

Mark 9:34 - ³⁴ But they were silent, because on the way they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest.

Yikes. We can imagine how this might have gone. "Well, you nine guys biffed that last exorcism, so you're definitely not gold medalists."

"Yeah, well, Jesus said *YOU* are *SATAN* and you had to get behind Him!"

"Yeah, but *WE* just got to do something that *definitely* puts us in the front running."

"Yeah, what *WERE* you guys doing up on Mount Hermon?"

"We can't say. But obviously Jesus thinks we're the most important."

It wasn't just an argument about glorifying God or being rewarded. They saw these things as a *competition* between each other. I get ranked *higher* and I *want* you to be lower than me.

This is human nature and none of us are immune. Even the Essenes, who isolated themselves from regular society out in Qumran and took care of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and lived strict, communal lives with no private property - *even they* obsessed over rank. Every year they would reevaluate each member's rank which determined their seating and their speaking order among the group.¹⁰

But what Jesus was trying to get across to the 12 is that the road He was leading them on is the way of the cross. And He uses this situation to drive home a key principle of Christianity.

Mark 9:35 - ³⁵ Sitting down, he called the Twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last and servant of all."

In Christ's Kingdom, greatness is *not* about beating your neighbor in position or accomplishment. It's not about out-running the Christian next to you. It is about conforming our mentality, our choices, our goals, and values to Heaven's standards of humility, grace, love, and service.

This little phrase in verse 34 is so important. First of all, Mark shows us that it is a *formal* moment of teaching.¹¹ As Rabbi, Jesus sits and then calls the 12 to come and listen. There were other people around, but this is an official, class-in-session scene for those who claim to be disciples.

¹⁰ Craig Keener *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (Second Edition)*

¹¹ R.T. France *The Gospel Of Mark*

But not only that, this idea of the first being last and the greatness of *servicing* is constantly repeated in the Gospels. Mark 9, Mark 10, Matthew 19, 20, and 23. Luke 13, 14, and 22. John 13.

One commentator writes, "This is such a radical challenge to natural human valuation that it needs constant repetition."¹²

Jesus said the path to spiritual greatness is *service*. Now, there are two principles I'd like us to think about. The first is that Jesus' teaching here was about *service*, not *suffering*. There are people *like* the Essenes who convince themselves and *try* to convince *you* that the path to glory is *suffering*.

Now listen: *We are* going to suffer in this life. And we *may* suffer for the Gospel. If you suffer for righteousness, you are blessed.¹³ But the goal of your Christian life isn't suffering. Jesus came to *serve*. His *service* was to suffer and die. But nowhere does He tell us to seek out suffering as a goal. *We are* commanded to seek out ways to serve Him. We can rejoice *in* suffering, knowing that the Lord is with us. But don't swap out discipleship for asceticism. Service for suffering.

The second principle here is that Christian service is ultimately a *mentality*, not a *meniality*. Here's what I mean: Christ's goal is *not* that you only care about doing the worst, grossest thing, which somehow makes you better. It's that you have the *mentality* of a living as a servant of all.

There *are* times when certain jobs need doing and *you* are not the person to do them. I know that because the 12, who Jesus was giving this teaching to, would later say, "We can't leave the study of the Word to wait tables. Let's find seven servants to do it."¹⁴ That *wasn't* them being snobbish or forgetting their place as servants. It's about what the Lord leads us to do.

Our *mentality* should be, "I'm here to serve." What does that mean today? It depends on the needs and opportunities the Lord has gathered around you. It depends on the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The path to *spiritual* greatness is through service. This is something we care about here at Calvary. Sometimes people will be new to our church and will say, "What can I do to be one of the leaders here?" Or, "When can I be the person speaking on the stage?" We always say the same thing: Push a broom. Stack a chair. Show the Lord you're willing to serve *in* menial ways and see what else He leads you to do. We don't need any other lords over the people. We have one Lord, and He will build His Church the way He sees fit. Our job is to serve Him and serve others.

To drive His point home, Jesus uses an object lesson.

Mark 9:36-37 - ³⁶ He took a child, had him stand among them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one little child such as this in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but him who sent me."

¹² France

¹³ 1 Peter 3:14

¹⁴ Acts 6:2

So there were other people there besides the disciples. Jesus uses this little guy to further elaborate on what it means for a Christian to serve. You see, children were not thought well of in ancient culture. They weren't valuable or significant.¹⁵ They had no status, no rights. And here Jesus says, "This person is someone I want you to concern yourself with *alongside* everyone else." So, it wasn't only about serving the impressive or the important, but also having a caring, compassionate, serving mentality toward the weak, the vulnerable, the defenseless, the unimportant.

And Jesus, once again, highlights the essential, intrinsic, eternal value of every person. Each of us made in His image, loved equally by Him. Each of us filling an innumerable succession of thoughts and intentions and cares in His mind.

Not only should they serve this child, Matthew's account explains that Jesus said they should *become like him*. Humble, dependent, submissive, and receptive to direction. Did you notice the boy does *exactly* what Jesus said without question? And did you see that beautiful tender detail: "And taking him in His arms." The boy wasn't just standing there awkwardly in the middle of the room. Jesus embraced him close to Himself in joyful affection. What an image. What a Savior!

This instruction is so key for us as Christians. But I was thinking about how gracious the Lord is, even in this. I mean, it's an upside-down Kingdom, last will be first, and it flows counter to the corrupted human nature. So, it's a challenge, to be sure, but did you notice the bar is set kind of low? Here's what I mean: Become like this child. Ok, just realize that Jesus loves you and can be trusted and that we have a lot to learn and we should follow His directions and allow ourselves to be embraced by our Savior. We make it harder than it needs to be.

And then, when it comes to *servicing*, the bar is still pretty low. It wasn't, "Whoever *raises this child from the dead* in My name," or, "Whoever *heals the infirmities of this child* in My name." It wasn't even, "Whoever *converts this child*." Just welcomes. Receives. Meaning we make it our business to represent Christ with love and action and truth to *whoever* He brings into our path - recognizing they are gifts given to us to receive, well then the Lord counts *that* as greatness in His Kingdom.

Charles Dickens famously changed the ending of his classic book *Great Expectations*. A friend and fellow novelist convinced him the original ending was too bleak. So Dickens made alterations so that there was an atmosphere of love and hope, even amidst the ruins of Satis House.

Christ has changed what our expectations of greatness should be. Not competing against each other, but conforming to His image and thereby living lives overflowing with love, humility, and service. Embracing others the way He does. Embracing *Him* the way He wants to. Living with heaven's mentality of humble willingness to love and serve whoever the Lord brings us to receive.

¹⁵ *The NET Bible First Edition: Notes*