
JESUS, THE PERFECT SERVANT**Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, 2021****Mark 9:30-37**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel read before, Mark 9:30-37: ³⁰ **They left that place and were passing through Galilee, and Jesus did not want anyone to know about it.** ³¹ **For He was teaching His disciples and telling them: “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, but, after He has been killed, He will rise on the third day.”**

³² **They did not understand what He said and were afraid to ask Him.**

³³ **Then they came to Capernaum. When He had come into the house, He asked them, “What were you discussing on the road?”**

³⁴ **They kept quiet. For on the road they had been discussing who the greatest was.** ³⁵ **Jesus sat down and called the Twelve. He told them, “If anyone wants to be the first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all!”**

³⁶ **He took a little child and set him among them. He put His arms around him and told them,** ³⁷ **“Whoever welcomes one of the little children like this one in My name welcomes Me. Whoever welcomes Me welcomes not Me but the One who has sent Me.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

As you would have been noticing, our sermon texts over the past few months have been coming from the Gospel of Mark. Today, as we continue through Mark, we come to that milestone that every Gospel account has, namely, Jesus preparing the disciples for His impending death and resurrection.

This was the second time Mark had recorded Jesus as speaking explicitly concerning His coming passion. The first was just before His transfiguration, only a short time before the events mentioned in today’s Gospel, which begin with the words, ³⁰ **They left that place and were passing through Galilee, and Jesus did not want anyone to know about it.** ³¹ **For He was teaching His disciples and telling them: “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men,**

and they will kill Him, but, after He has been killed, He will rise on the third day.”

³² They did not understand what He said and were afraid to ask Him.”

The disciples were not equipped to understand Jesus at this time in their instruction. The idea that the true mission of their Master was to die on a cross was not part of their thinking process. After all His teaching and referring to this truth contained in the Old Testament prophecy that Jesus had done, the disciples were still acting in ignorance and were at the same time too afraid to ask Him what He had meant. Perhaps they still had the idea that Jesus would be a *political Messiah* who would drive the occupying Roman forces from the land and clean up the corruption of the religious establishment in Jerusalem, once again establishing the empire of Israel as it had been under the reign of David and Solomon.

So it was that Jesus' words totally stumped the disciples. It was not until *after* the crucifixion and resurrection that the disciples came to understand that Jesus had simply been telling them *exactly what was going to happen to Him*.

It would be so easy for us to frown upon the disciples, but in reality, we have no reason to criticise them. We live *after* the resurrection, which gives us 20/20 hindsight. We can read the Bible and know exactly what Jesus meant. We simply cannot place ourselves in the position of the disciples when Jesus foretold these things to them.

So why is it that, given that we have 20/20 hindsight, we still fall into the same trap that the disciples demonstrated in the second part of today's Gospel? As Jesus and His disciples **“had come into the house, He asked them, “What were you discussing on the road?”**

³⁴ They kept quiet. For on the road they had been discussing who the greatest was.”

Why were the disciples concerned about the matter of greatness? Not only was it very human, but perhaps Jesus' own actions had suggested it. For the second time, He had taken three of them aside as special witnesses - first when he had healed Jairus' daughter and then on the mountain at His transfiguration. The latter must have intrigued the nine even more since the three did not report what had happened there. And then there had been Jesus' own words to Simon, calling him Peter, a rock.¹ All this was puzzling to men who as yet did not know the whole story as we do. At the same time, it also revealed their sinful hearts, and Jesus was concerned

¹ Mark 8:29. But see Matthew 16:17-18.

about that. So Jesus used the discussion among the disciples as an opportunity to teach them and us what it means to be a leader in His church. He said, **“If anyone wants to be the first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all!”**

In God’s family, the leader serves. The one who is the highest makes himself the lowest. The leader in God’s family sacrifices not to get power but to serve others. To be first means to be last, to be a servant. *No service is too lowly*. Service means sacrificing your time, your talents, yourself for the sake of others, ***even when they do not realise or appreciate it.***

Jesus nailed this point home by taking a child in His arms and telling the disciples to serve the child. He said, ³⁷ **“Whoever welcomes one of the little children like this one in My name welcomes Me. Whoever welcomes Me welcomes not Me but the One who has sent Me.”** With these words, Jesus tells us that anyone who cares for a child is caring for God, for the One who sent Jesus is none other than God the Father Himself.

When Jesus used the child as an example, He emphasised what He meant by serving all people. He was talking about the entire spectrum of society. He was not only asking us to serve those who are young physically, but also those who are young *spiritually or mentally* even though they live in older bodies. He was asking us to serve all people.

These words of Jesus force us to look at ourselves. Can we honestly say that we are willing servants? And if the answer is “yes,” then do we serve because ***we want*** to share God’s love with others or do we serve so that ***people will notice us and tell us how wonderful we are***? Do we get angry when we serve, but people fail to acknowledge our contribution, or even speak unfavourably about our service? You know how it is. You do the best you can: you put in a lot of time and thought and effort, only to feel deflated and even outright rejected by those whom you serve because they say or do something you don’t appreciate. So then you lose the desire to willingly serve, and if you do continue to serve, you only do it because you *have* to, not because you *want* to. All of a sudden, your serving becomes only skin deep, and not from a deep desire to serve your fellow men out of thankfulness for all that your Servant, Jesus Christ, ***has done for you.***

God judges by the heart and examines our motives. Do we only serve in order to get noticed? Then it really isn’t service. Hear what Jesus had to say on this topic in the Sermon on the Mount: ***“Be careful not to perform your righteous deeds before other people, to be seen by them! If you do, you have no reward from your Father***

in heaven. ² *Therefore, when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be praised by other people! Truly, I tell you, they have their reward in full.*

³ *“When you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,* ⁴ *that your giving may be in secret! Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you”* (Matthew 6:1-4). This passage from the Sermon on the Mount contains some of the saddest words in the Bible: *“They have their reward in full.”* If they have their reward **now**, then there is no heaven for them **later**.

If we examine our being servants of others in the light of the teachings of Jesus, then surely we have to admit that we are not doing a perfect job.

What is our excuse? At least the disciples could say at that time that they hadn't witnessed the death and resurrection, but unlike the disciples, we know that Christ has died on the cross for our sins. We know that He has risen from the dead. We have heard this Gospel before and know that the role of a Christian is to serve others. As the Apostle Peter writes, *“You should each serve one another with whatever charismatic gift you have received, as good managers of the manifold grace of God!”* (1 Peter 4:10). God's gifts are not personal possessions but are meant to be used according to His will. Nevertheless, we don't want to be true servants. We want to be the big boss. We even want to judge God when His teachings are not what we want them to be. We consider ourselves to be the greatest - even greater than the teachings and revelation of the God who has created us.

Even though we are arrogant and self-righteous, God still wants to rescue us. He still wants us to be part of His family. He still wants to rescue us from our own arrogance and all our other sins. That is why He has sent His Son to become one of us in this world. God has sent His Son to be the Servant we could never be. The Holy Spirit inspired Isaiah to speak of Him before He was even born in this way: *“Look! My Servant will be successful. He will be high, be lifted up and be highly exalted... He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom people hide their faces, He was despised, and we thought of Him as nothing.* ⁴ *Surely, **He has taken on Himself our sufferings and carried our sorrows.** Yet we considered Him to be wounded, struck down by God and afflicted.* ⁵ *However, He was pierced for our rebellious acts. He was bruised for our wrongdoings. The chastisement that brought us peace was on Him, and **through His wounds we have been healed.*** ⁶ *We have all gone astray, like sheep. Each one of us has turned to his own way, and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 52:13; 53:3-6). God has come down to this earth to

serve us, and what have we done? We have beaten Him, whipped Him, and hung Him on a cross. Nevertheless, He has served us perfectly. He has given His life for us. He has sacrificed Himself to save us from our sins. Although He deserved to be first, He made Himself last for us. This perfect Servant who sacrificed Himself for us is Jesus Christ - the same Jesus Christ who has hugged children and told us to welcome them as we would welcome God the Father.

Jesus Christ, the perfect Servant, has sacrificed Himself on the cross in order to save us from the condemnation of our imperfect service. God the Father has honoured the service of His sacrifice by calling Him out of the grave. Christ has risen from the dead to eternal life. God the Father now sees our woefully inadequate service as perfect service. For Christ's sake, He now deems us worthy to receive Him, even if it is in the guise of a little child.

Jesus Christ, our Saviour who was once dead, but now lives forevermore, serves us today. He serves us with the forgiveness of our sins. He serves us with His Word, the Holy Scriptures. He serves us with His life-giving body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine of the sacrament. He continually serves us with His living presence.

Ultimately, it is the desire of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, to serve us with new, holy bodies that will rise from the dead just as He rose and then our service will be perfect as we serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. In that place, it won't even cross our minds to ask who is the greatest. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You for Your wisdom, power, and holiness. But, above all, we worship You for Your goodness and forgiving love to all who call on You. You have changed us from enemies into friends through the sufferings and death of Your Son, who became a human being for our sakes. We are Your children, and come to You confidently in His name with our prayers and requests.

Give us an awareness of Your majesty and power, and that holy fear of You that is the basis of all true wisdom. Continue to supply our daily needs, giving us life

and breath, health and contentment, and protection from every kind of danger to body and soul.

Especially look with mercy on our moral and spiritual weakness. By Your Holy Spirit free us from the evil from which we cannot free ourselves, and give us new life through faith in Jesus Christ. May Jesus speak His word of forgiveness to us, and become the ruler of our consciences, the focus of our wills, the centre of our motives, and the Lord of our lives. Let Christ's love for us fill Your Church. Enable all Your people to know more of the vastness of that love, although it can never be fully known. In its power may they love one another in the family of faith, show loving sympathy to all in need, and offer forgiveness to all their enemies. Fill us with such love for each other that we may avoid placing any obstacle that would cause a brother to sin against his over-scrupulous conscience.

Show the nations of the earth the fullness of Your goodness and grace, that they may turn to You, the only true God, and find salvation in Your Son Jesus Christ. Lord, You have been gracious to our land. Continue to bless us, that more and more may turn from evil, come to faith, and be made rich by Your gifts.

We pray also for a special measure of Your blessing on those who sorrow or mourn, those who suffer pain or sickness, and those who face temptation or danger. Because we ourselves deserve Your chastening and discipline, help us to receive in patience and humility whatever You send in our lives, knowing that You are lovingly preparing us for eternal fellowship with You.

O Lord, You are able to do so much more than we can ever ask for or even think of. Hear these prayers, and provide all our other needs, in the name of our blessed Redeemer and Lord Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 11:18-20

¹⁸ Because the LORD revealed this to me, I became aware of it. Then You showed me what they were doing.

¹⁹ Nevertheless, I had been like a trusting lamb being led to the slaughter. I did not know that they had been plotting against me, saying:

“Let us destroy the tree with its fruit! Let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may not be remembered any longer!”

²⁰ However, O LORD of hosts, You judge righteously. You **test the inner being** and the heart. Let me see Your retribution on them! For I have made my case known to You.

James 3:13-4:10

¹³ Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him by his good conduct show that his works are done in humble wisdom! ¹⁴ However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth! ¹⁵ This “wisdom” does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual and demonic. ¹⁶ For where there is jealousy and selfishness, disorder and every evil practice are there. ¹⁷ The wisdom that comes from above is, first of all, pure, then peaceful, gentle, willing to obey, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and without pretence. ¹⁸ Those who make peace are also sowing a harvest of righteousness in peace.

^{4:1} Where do wars and where do fights come from among you? Do they not come from this, from your desires for pleasure, which wage war among your members? ² You desire and do not have. So, you murder. You try to get something and cannot obtain it. So, you quarrel and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you are asking wrongly, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

⁴ Adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore,

whoever wants to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think the Scripture says without reason: “God jealously longs for the Spirit, whom He has caused to dwell in us”? ⁶ However, He gives more grace. Therefore, it says, “**God opposes proud people but gives grace to humble people.**” ⁷ Therefore, be subordinate to God! Resist the Devil! He will flee from you. ⁸ Go near to God! He will come near to you. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, double minded people! ⁹ Be miserable, mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom! ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord! He will lift you up.

Mark 9:30-37

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