

What Do You Think He Meant?

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Scriptures:

Mark 9:30-37 (NRSV)

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for 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.' ³²But 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?' ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' ³⁶Then 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.'

Sermon:

People tend to see our passages this morning as Jesus' disciples being involved in some petty, internal discussion about who is going to be the big cheeses in Jesus' group and in God's kingdom when it comes on earth. But, there is a lot more going on here than meets the modern eye.

In Jesus' culture, as I have said on numerous occasions, one's honor ranking or social standing was a pivotal life-value. A person's fundamental honor standing was ascribed to them by their birth family and its standing in the community as well as the general reputation of one's village. Such schemes of social rankings served to order life not only within families but villages, towns, and even nations.

One's ascribed honor standing was pretty much fixed and recognized by others. However, a person could acquire additional honor status either through the forces of fate - the gods or God's favor, athletic or heroic military feats, and benevolent acts in the interest of others or the village. But such acquired honor came at the expense of others and their honor standing.

Retired Professor Jerome Neyrey of the University of Notre Dame gives us some insights into this point in his book, "Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew", when he quotes George M. Foster's 1967 article in the *American Anthropologist Journal* (Issue 2, 1967:293-315). I quote: "peasants view their social, economic, and natural universes - their total environment - as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, *exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply, as far as the peasant is concerned.* Not only do these and all other "good things" exist in finite and limited quantities, *but in addition there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities.* Therefore, one person's gain is always at someone else's expense. Hence, if anyone in the village acquires wealth, fame, or any other thing valued by the group, then the rest of the village or neighborhood will perceive themselves as correspondingly losing worth and value." (Neyrey, 1998, p. 18). Therefore, no one willingly relinquishes honor standing to another unless forced to or are outwitted in doing so.

Another person's success or gain evoked the possibility of the cardinal sin in the Ancient Near East - envy. Envy can become an insidious and destructive force within the hearts and minds of people; therefore, do not envy to the point that one covets thy neighbor's wife, house, livestock, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor, including their honor standing.

So, let us see these disciples traveling around the countryside with Jesus as his new surrogate family, which he had defined in Mark 3:33, minus their familiar self-references. In addition, if a person stepped outside of the expectations of his or her social-standing, this also caused consternation in families and villages as we see in Mark's Gospel when Jesus returned to his hometown after having acquired his new honor status as a teacher-healer and ran afoul of the village elders as he would later the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees.

Also, let us see Jesus and his disciples as a group of men and possibly some women as a new, anti-in-group surrogate family within the greater group of Israelites in ancient Galilee, not Judea. This last distinction is also important, but for another time. In such a new context, it becomes critical to locate one's sense of self and self-worth using the existing social, honor-ranking traditions or otherwise who are you. Not only that but arriving at some honor ranking scheme would also help avoid confusion and the possibilities of envy and disharmony among the disciples as well as the extended group of Jesus' followers.

So, we can imagine the disciples trying to determine and fix a ranking scheme among themselves. Jesus has picked up on the disciples' discussion and joins in and does not criticize them. However, Jesus turns the disciples' traditional understanding of honor status or greatness on its ear, when he gives a new paradigm for honor within his surrogate family.

Jesus has had his newly acquired honor status affirmed in the court of public opinion, as honor standings must always be, through his mighty deeds for the good of others along with his challenging the boundaries of the social system on behalf of the powerless and marginalized.

We've heard today that Jesus has come to Capernaum and has entered a house. Whose house we don't know. This was most likely the house Jesus used as his home base after his earlier set-to with his family and village. In response to his disciple's quest for a pecking order among themselves, Jesus defines the criteria for honor standing or greatness among his disciples by saying that 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' He reinforces this point by using a child as an object lesson.

Let me interject that I think that as sweet as it may be, we should not put too much stock in the pictures of children playing at the knee of a gentle Jesus. Such a thing would not have been congruent with the life and times of Jesus.

Children were invisible people and had little status within the community or family. A minor child was [socially] on par with a slave, and only after reaching maturity was he/she a person of significant value¹ Thus, we see the contrasts between an ancient culture that venerated age and our modern culture that worships youth.

Please let us understand that a child's social status didn't mean they were not loved and valued, it just means that in many respects, given the mortality rates and other social factors, they weren't taken very seriously beyond the inherent psychological, emotional, and social value to their parents as well as their potential as caretakers for their parents in their old age.²

Therefore, the child in our scriptures this morning is an anomaly. Children generally stayed with the women in the women's quarters and would not have been allowed to wander about among a group of adult men. Therefore, we could easily see this child not as an errant

¹ Bruce Malina; Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Kindle Locations 3982-3984). Kindle Edition.

² Ibid

or indulged child but as a slave, possibly an orphaned slave, serving the men.³ And, we don't know if the child is a girl or a boy, although the child's gender would not have added any further significance to Jesus' lesson. Given these understandings, it makes what Jesus says about greatness even more shocking and disconcerting to these male disciples.

So, a disciple's honor standing - their measure of prominence and value - was to be shaped and determined by how well they "in Jesus' name" ceded their social status as men and any inherited honor to receive, welcome, and extend hospitality and social acceptance to the marginalized; such as widows, orphans, slaves, the poor, the displaced, diseased, or demonic. In other words, family honor and village honor are no longer the defining criteria of one's worth and status. Now a disciple's acquired honor standing before God and others is derived through their deeds of compassion, care, and justice in Jesus' name for the little ones or those of diminished social importance and abilities.

What is interesting is the phrase "in Jesus' name." The use of a person's name evoked everything a person was in the minds of others, including their family and their social standing, their character, their authority, and their deeds, etc. So, receiving someone in Jesus' name was to receive them as Jesus, the holy one of God, would receive and treat them.

Jesus had declared the purposes of his mission and ministry was to proclaim the Good News of the coming of the kingdom of God, and like John the Baptist, call people to repent; that is, call people to reassess their ways of life and their life-values and turn around and go the true ways of God. To these ends, Jesus' wondrous deeds gave credence to him as one sent from God and the authority of his teachings. In the kingdom of God, justice, mercy, and compassion would be the order of the day, meaning that those who were victimized or marginalized by others or by life circumstances would be restored to a state of wholeness, blessed, and honored.

So, for a disciple to acquire a new honor standing - a place of greatness as it were - in the surrogate family of Jesus and the coming kingdom meant that they, like Jesus, must care for what God cares for; which was the proclamation of the kingdom of God coming on earth and caring for those genuinely less fortunate and victimized.

In summary, one's greatness or standing before God was in truth known only to God, but among one's peers, a disciples' honor status and value was determined by how they served the un-served or underserved.

To this point, let me say that in the two-tiered social structure of Jesus' day, made up of the elites and non-elites, not everyone who was poor or without honor standing was a victim, some were just lazy or fools, and thereby deserving of their fates. Furthermore, Jesus recognized that the two-tiered social system was the norm and there to stay - "you will always have the poor with you," he says in Mark 14:7. The injustices or abuses Jesus addresses when speaking to the elites of Israel as well as to his own peers, was that they were not to make things worse for those already disadvantaged. Furthermore, the elites must not neglect or abuse those who are already undervalued such as women, children, or the physically and mentally disabled. The elites and the wealthy are blessed by God and made to prosper in part as the ways and means of sharing and caring for such people. Sort of a trickle-down charitable, redistribution system.

In our western culture, in general, we aim for more than just not victimizing or taking advantage of the disadvantaged. In our moral and social consciousness, I believe born out of the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we aim to help people improve their plight in life by making educational, social, medical, and financial means available to help them and by encouraging them to achieve and become self-reliant.

³ Ibid

But, back to Jesus and his crew. Imagine this group of men - steeped in the social and cultural values of their day as I have outlined, being told that even though they were second-tier people in the socio-economic and cultural ladder, they needed attitudes and a willingness to lower themselves even further to become servants of the lowest of the low. It must have been a shock and a bitter pill to swallow.

Surely, Jesus was just kidding. He was just using a hyperbole to make a point, right? He couldn't really mean they had to be open to and willing to engage the bottom rungs of God's people - children, orphans, widows, the demonic, the leper, the blind and deaf - as their servants if they wanted to have any significance within Jesus' group and concomitantly before God?

What do you think Jesus meant? Do you think he really meant what he said or said what he meant? If so, I wonder if many Christians today really understand Jesus' system of greatness or are they still confusing lay and professional religious status or personal piety with greatness in Christ.

Well, as we heard in the opening words of our passages today, Jesus predicted that he would soon be subjected to the ultimate honor degradation on Calvary because of his willingness to acquiesce and submit himself to God's will for his life. So, if I had been one of Jesus' disciples in Mark's day, knowing Jesus' tendencies toward self-expenditure to the point of self-sacrifice, I would have also been, as are many today, afraid to ask him what he meant.

So, just between you and me, what do you think he meant, or did he mean what he said?

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