

Would you consider yourself a competitive person? Or maybe I should ask, in what area are you most competitive? Maybe you were competitive in getting the best grades or the best parking spot at work. Maybe you compete to make the best pancakes in your family or winning all the card games or to get up the earliest on Christmas morning. **Humans are naturally competitive. We like to have an edge over others.**

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a driven young man in the pre-med program at a competitive college. The summer before his junior year, the young man took a break from his studies to travel to the Far East. He met a guru who questioned his pursuit of success. The guru claimed that the young man's constant desire to compete against others was poisoning his soul. He invited the young man to join him at his retreat center, where all the students loved one another and shared their possessions. So, the ambitious pre-med student called his parents and told them he was dropping out of medical school.

A few months later, he wrote a letter to explain his new way of life. His letter began: "Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren't happy about my decision, but I want to tell you how it has changed me. For the first time in my life, I'm at peace. Here there is no competing, no trying to get ahead of anyone. **This way of life is so in harmony with my inner soul that in only six months I've become the #2 disciple in the entire community, and I think I can be #1 by June.**"

It's not so easy giving up the need to compete, is it? **There are big rewards for competition in our culture.** Status. Promotions. Paychecks. Bragging rights. But what does competition do to our soul? It depends on the motivation behind the competition.

In our culture, we often base our identity and self-worth on whether or not we are "Number 1." But someone is always going to outrun us, outrank us, out-perform us. The greatest athlete on earth may have a lousy marriage. The richest person in the world may be in poor health. Someone always has something we want. The competition never ends.

There's a story of a man who had just sat down at his favorite restaurant and ordered his favorite milkshake. By the time the milkshake was placed in front of him, he needed to use the restroom. So, he grabbed a pen and wrote on his napkin, "The world's strongest weight lifter," and placed the napkin under the edge of his glass. Surely no one would steal a milkshake from the world's strongest weight lifter! He returned to the table a few minutes later to find that someone had drunk his favorite milkshake. The person had also flipped over the napkin and written on the back, "Thanks for the treat!" Signed, "The world's fastest runner."

That's the problem with being a competitive person. You're always chasing after some other person, after some other record. Someone will always be greater than you. You can waste a lot of energy, and lose a lot of joy, by always trying to stay a step ahead of the other guy.

Of course, Jesus understands our need to compete. He understands our desire to be the greatest. Fear and pride drive us to put our needs first, and to compare ourselves to others. But fear and pride are cannibalistic urges. They may drive us to achieve great things, but they also steal away the joy of achievement, and drive us further away from God and from others. **Remember Jesus' words in John 10:10** where he said that he has come to give us a more abundant life? When Jesus confronted his disciples in this passage, he wasn't trying to shame them. He was trying to open their minds to the abundant life God had made them for.

And that brings us to our Bible passage for today, Mark 9: 30-37. I love how Jesus, who has the infinite knowledge of God, asks questions of us. He doesn't ask because he is ignorant. Jesus asks us questions so we will be honest with ourselves. Sometimes when you say something out loud, you realize how crazy it is. So, Jesus asked his disciples, ***"What were you arguing about on the road? But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest."***

That's hilarious, isn't it? The disciples had seen Jesus feed a crowd of thousands, heal the sick and disabled, and heal a boy who was possessed by a demon. And yet they were arguing over which of *them* was the greatest in the group. That's like bragging to a famous chef that you finally learned how to make toast. Or telling a Navy SEAL that you fought off an attack from an aggressive butterfly on your nature walk.

Pastor Andy Kort tells of an incident that happened in his adult Sunday school class one morning. The young adults were chatting about their college alma maters, and the conversation became an opportunity for some good-natured "one-up Manship." Someone boasted that he went to Davidson College. Someone else graduated from Duke, someone else from North Carolina. All excellent schools.

One young man remained quiet, so the students looked in his direction and asked him which school he'd graduated from. The young man said, "Just a little school up north." "Which one?" they asked. "Yale," he replied. "Have you heard of it?" And that put an end to the boasting for the day.

If I'd been Jesus, I would have laughed and laughed. Maybe I would have asked the disciples to explain their criteria for greatness. But Jesus didn't waste time with that. Our Bible passage reads, ***"Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.' He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'"***

One of the most popular movies in American culture is *The Wizard of Oz*, which came out in theaters in 1939. It may surprise you to know that *The Wizard of Oz*, which cost over \$2 million dollars to produce, was a flop when it came out. One movie reviewer said the movie had "no trace of imagination, good taste, or ingenuity." In fact, it took 20 years after its initial theater run for *The Wizard of Oz* to make back the money the studio spent to create it. But in the years since 1939, the movie has become incredibly popular on television. The movie studio has made a great deal more money on licensing the movie for television viewers than they ever imagined making in the theaters.

One of the most popular lines from the movie occurs right after the main character, Dorothy, and her little dog Toto have been caught up in a tornado. The tornado tears them out of their tiny Kansas farm and lands them in the magical, mythical land of Oz. As Dorothy stares in amazement at the strange and beautiful new world around them, she blurts out, ***"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."***

This line has become one of the movie's most quoted lines because it's such a great, understated way of saying, ***"Wake up! You are in a brand-new world, and the old rules don't apply here anymore."***

That's exactly what Jesus is saying in our Bible passage for this morning: ***"You're not in Kansas anymore! The old rules about status-honor-greatness that matter in your culture don't matter in the kingdom of God."***

It doesn't matter how our culture defines "greatness." Jesus is telling us...THE FIRST RULE "FOR GREATNESS" is to go where The Greatest would go. Jesus is the Almighty God, the Great I AM, the Alpha and the Omega in the flesh. And he gave his GREATNESS to be born into a poor family in a ho-hum little town. He gave all that up to become a carpenter. He gave all that up to spend his time working with fishermen, and eating and drinking with sinners, and healing the sick and disabled. He gave all that up to suffer an unimaginably painful and humiliating death to save us from the penalty of our sins and restore us to God. **Where would Jesus go for us?** The real question is ***"Where wouldn't he go for us?"*** He went from the glory of heaven to the agony of the cross to show us how much God loves us. ***If you really want to be the greatest, Jesus says, then go where The Greatest would go.***

Many years ago, an eleven-year-old boy named Trevor Ferrell saw a news report on the problem of homelessness in Philadelphia, his hometown. Trevor was so concerned about the idea of people sleeping on the street that he convinced his parents to gather up as many spare blankets as possible from their home and drive him into downtown Philadelphia. And then this young boy walked up to the first homeless person he saw and offered them a blanket. Trevor walked up and down those streets handing out blankets until he ran out.

And this was just the beginning of Trevor's mission. He convinced his parents to collect bags full of clothes, and make dozens of peanut butter sandwiches to donate to the homeless folks downtown. Someone heard of Trevor's mission, and they donated a van and volunteers toward his efforts. Soon, national television news programs began interviewing him. Why would an eleven-year-old kid from a wealthy suburb spend his evenings and weekends making food and collecting blankets for the homeless?

All Trevor could say was, "It's Jesus inside of me that makes me want to do this."

Trevor Ferrell had Jesus, the Greatest One of All, living inside of him, and this motivated him to go where Jesus would go, to the neediest members of his community, to share the love of Jesus with them.

And the "SECOND RULE OF GREATNESS" is that greatness isn't about you. It's about God working through you. *Read through the Bible from beginning to end and look very carefully at who God used to do His work.* God didn't choose the strongest, the most powerful, the bravest, the smartest people to change the world. In fact, almost everyone God chose to use for His work *would have been voted "Least Likely to Succeed."* So how did they end up being heroes of the faith? They let God use them for His good works. **So, what would happen if you and I did the same thing?**

Pastor William Hinson and his wife Jean visited Plymouth, England, a few years ago. As they visited the spot where the Pilgrim ships set sail for the New World, Pastor Hinson recalled the words of John Robinson, the English pastor who went with them. Robinson warned the Pilgrims, **"I charge you to follow me only as far as you see me following Jesus Christ. Follow me only that far."**

"... follow me only as far as you see me following Jesus Christ." Pastor John Robinson knew that the secret of greatness lies in following Jesus' example. People may be impressed by our achievements, but they will be inspired by our service.

Pastor Edward Marquart saw this kind of greatness in a member of his congregation, a man named Bill Grant. Bill and his wife Mary had raised 24 foster children during their marriage. After retiring from the restaurant business, Bill Grant joined the church mission team and traveled to Mississippi twice to help folks who were affected by hurricanes Rita and Katrina. While the other volunteers from his church rebuilt damaged homes, Bill ran the kitchen operations that fed hundreds of volunteer workers. It was hard, hard work, but you'd never know it from Bill's attitude. Bill beamed with joy as he dished out food and encouragement to the volunteer workers. *You also wouldn't know that while he was serving with the mission team in Mississippi, Bill Grant was battling terminal pancreatic cancer.* He never told the members of his team about the fatigue and pain he endured every day.

After he returned from his second mission trip, Bill Grant entered the hospital. Pastor Marquart came to visit him. He knew he didn't have much more time. Pastor Marquart was so moved by this man's joy, his encouragement, his service on behalf of others. To the world, Bill Grant may have looked like a frail, dying old man, ***but in the pastor's eyes, he was A SPIRITUAL GIANT.*** Pastor Marquart says, "I told his charge nurse that we were in the presence of greatness when we were in Bill's hospital room. I just wanted to make sure that she understood that . . . I just wanted his hospital staff to know who they were caring for."

WHY DID GOD CREATE YOU?? Was it to collect paychecks and promotions and first place in the pecking order? Or was it to bring hope and life to a dying world? **Greatness, as defined by The Greatest One of All, Jesus Christ, consists of two rules:** **Go where Jesus would go**—to the least, the last, the lost and the lonely. **And Let God use you to serve those in need.** **Your life will have an eternal, immeasurable impact if you compete to be "THE GREATEST" in the kingdom of God.** Amen.