

“Living in Last Place?”—Mark 9:35-37

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is “Living in Last Place?”, is Mark 9:35-37 → *Jesus sat down and called the twelve. And He said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And He took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him Who sent Me.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

If Jimmy were to describe his life it would be summed up in the mantra of “living in last place.” Whenever it came time for PE in grade school he was literally always the last person to be picked by the captains of each team because everyone knew he was no good at anything! It was no different with the friends in the neighborhood whenever they gathered to play games. In the lunch line other kids would “cut in” making sure he was the last in line. He was the easiest “target” for bullying, “beating up” and ridicule. Things did not really improve in his middle and high school years either. Living in last place became a more intense identity when it came to school dances and there

wasn't one girl who was willing to be seen at the dance with him!

Sitcoms may joke about the nerds taking on and accepting their identity. However, it really is not a joking matter. The world forces people to live in last place because they're not talented enough, not popular enough, not strong enough, not pretty enough . . . in other words . . . not right for life in our world. Living in last place according to the world's standards is living with constant rejection and a feeling of misplacement. Now you know how Jesus felt!

As Jesus was preparing His disciples for the events of His suffering, death and resurrection in Jerusalem, He gave them a "children's sermon," privately teaching them the importance of living in "last place." This teaching was very important in light of His disciples' concepts of life in His kingdom.

We know from various Gospel accounts that Jesus' disciples were more concerned about their own roles in this kingdom as they perceived it than in Jesus' understanding of this kingdom. Luke 9:46 gives us a glimpse of their aspirations: *An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.* How sad! Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to get spit upon, mocked, flogged, nailed to a cross and His disciples are arguing about who's going to be the greatest in their group?! We don't make it about ourselves at all, do we? . . . or do we? Like us, these disciples needed a lesson on living in last place—a lesson on humility.

We are no different than these disciples. Actually, it is impossible for you to do something without any concern for yourself in one way or another. The most generous, caring, self-sacrificing person cannot squelch the sin which so taints every activity of our being. Your purist motives, your finest work, your most caring acts—even your most righteous deeds—are like filthy rags in God’s sight. (cf. Isaiah 64:6) How would you respond in the presence of God Who knows the sinful motives of your heart even better than you?

When Jesus confronted His disciples about their discussion Mark 9:34 says *they kept silent*. Their reaction seems to reflect shame, feeling guilty because they were only concerned about their own lives as Jesus spoke about His death. The conviction of the Holy Spirit upon our sin stops us in our tracks, silences our pride and self-centeredness and brings us to our knees with a “last place” feeling of guilt so that we cry out, “Lord, have mercy on a sinner such as I!” In His loving patience Jesus says, “My son, you are forgiven!” and then proceeds to teach us how to continue serving Him in our daily lives. In His love He treats us last place sinners as first place winners!

This is why Jesus came and took last place for you! He came to serve you in the most pure and perfect manner possible as true God and true man. He gave up everything for you by offering Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of your sins and sin-tainted deeds. He willingly took the

punishment of hell and the cross, rising from the dead **for you** so you can be in “first place” eternally!!

Because of this work of Jesus the Holy Spirit creates in us a desire to live in “last place” so that others will be “first” in God’s Kingdom too!! That’s what Jesus meant with His statement in verse 35 of our text: *If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.* In our push and shove, position, power and possession seeking world, these words make no sense at all! The world, the devil and your own sinful nature teach you do whatever it takes to make a name for yourself and be “successful” at all costs . . . except personal cost that is! Jesus tells you to *be last of all and servant of all!*

Then He reinforced His teaching on service and humility with a “children’s sermon.” Yep, He used a little child as an “object lesson” for His disciples to teach them the real meaning of humble service in His Kingdom. Verses 36-37 of our text says: *He took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him Who sent Me.”*

This was a radical concept in a world where children were considered so insignificant. Their presence was so easily dismissed and were thought to be “seen, but not heard.” They were an easy target for use and abuse because

they were so weak. Children were so resigned to “last place” that days later these same disciples rebuked the crowds for bringing little children to Jesus *that He might touch them. But when Jesus saw it, He was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to Me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And He took them in His arms and blessed them, laying His hands on them.* He practice what He had earlier preached to His disciples! First place in His kingdom is given to those who take last place under His grace.

Serving others “in the name of Jesus” is service motivated by a humble faith in Jesus because of His having served you God’s grace, love and forgiveness through His humble life, death and resurrection. Because He put you in “first place” you now place others in “first place” in service to Christ! Serving “in the name of Jesus” has nothing to do with that person’s standing or position, their relationship with you, whether or not they’re family or a best friend, or even the “justifiable” nature of their need. **It has to do with being faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ.** That’s how you combat partiality in service. Your faith is in Christ as you focus on the person your serving.

Philippians 2:3 says: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves,* with the humble

attitude of Christ Jesus. Jesus is actually telling us that we are constantly living in last place if we are living in a faith relationship with Him. Living in last place recognizes that He takes first place! Such service is not done by us according to the ways of the world but rather it is done by His Holy Spirit working through us last place forgiven sinners.

Jesus reinforced this teaching days later when James and John wanted to sit at His right and left in His kingdom. In Mark 10:42-45 *Jesus called them to Him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."* Notice the motivation is not to be first. It's because Jesus gave His life for us in the first place!

Herman Goekel, in his book, "Give Your Life a Lift," tells the story of a very wealthy woman who had given great sums of money to benevolent projects and missions in her church. One day she decided to take a trip to visit some of the mission projects that her money had so generously endowed. She visited a hospital where wonderful help was afforded to needy natives. She stopped at an orphanage where the children of the streets were cared for.

She went to a leper colony where a loving nurse was treating those who were suffering from the putrefying disease. She commented, probably more to herself than to the host, “My, I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars!” The nurse who was treating the patient answered, “Neither would I.”

The primary focus is on Jesus—not the one being served, not the task at hand and not the service that we’re doing. The primary focus is on Jesus and on the fact that we have been served, undeservedly, with God’s grace in Jesus Christ so we can truly live in last place while giving others first place.

Oh . . . and by the way . . . remember Jimmy from the beginning of this sermon? Someone who chose to live in last place for Jimmy brought the Good News of Jesus’ first place love for Him so that He too went from being a last sinner to a first place winner! Amen.

Ephesians 6:7 says, *Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men.* (NIV) Amen.