

## THE VERY LAST AND THE SERVANT OF ALL

Mark 9:30-50

Key Verse 9:35

*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."*

A German author Hermann Hesse's short novel *The Journey To The East* (1932) tells a mythical journey of a privileged group named "the League." The members of the League had their own goals of the journey: one was seeking treasures, another was pursuing magical power, the third was desiring to meet a beautiful princess to win her love, and so on. However, the central figure of the story was Leo, who was one of the servants of the group. Leo helped to carry the luggage and was often assigned to the personal service of the members. He did his work happily, usually singing or whistling as he went along. He was never seen except when needed. He was an ideal servant whom everyone loved. Their journey to the East went very well until Leo suddenly disappeared one day. Then, all the members realized that it was the beginning of trouble because they would not be able to continue their journey without their servant Leo. The journey was abandoned and the narrator, who was one of the members, wandered some years to find Leo. Finally, he met the servant and discovered that Leo was in fact the president of the privileged group "the League." Indeed, he was a great and noble leader without whom the group members could not achieve their goals.

This novel inspired Robert Greenleaf, who coined the phrase "servant leadership" in his essay titled "The Servant as Leader" published in 1970. Most of us have heard the phrase "servant leadership," recognizing it as an ideal concept for Christian leadership. We know that our Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect example of servant leadership. He lived as a servant even though he was in very nature God (Php 2:6) and taught his disciples to be the servant of all. However, I confess that it is not easy at all to live as a servant in my daily life. Many fathers including me think that we are the leaders of our families. However, usually mothers serve their families more than fathers do, at least in my case. The kids always need their moms saying, "Mom, I'm hungry" "Mom, where is my shirt?" "Mom, can I watch TV?" "Mom, can you help me?" etc. But do you know what is the most common question of the kids to their dads? It is: "Dad, where's mom?" Then, we husbands must recognize that our wives are the servants and leaders of our families.

Today's passage contains many teachings of Jesus to his disciples: Jesus would be killed and rise; anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all; whoever welcomes a little child in Jesus' name welcomes Jesus; whoever is not against us is for us; do not cause little ones to stumble; have salt among yourselves, and so on. I think that these precious teachings of Jesus can be compiled through a phrase: "Be the servant of all." Today Jesus teaches us saying, "*Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.*" I pray that God may bless each of us to be the servants of all and great in the kingdom of God through this message!

Please look at verse 30. *“They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were.”* After healing a demon possessed boy, Jesus passed through Galilee. Always a crowd was following Jesus; however, Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were. Why? Verse 31a explains it saying, *“because he was teaching his disciples.”* Jesus wanted to have a private time with his disciples because he wanted to teach them something very important: *“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”* (31b) Jesus identified himself as the Son of Man because of his messianic mission and full humanity. Jesus would be delivered into the hands of men, not because he did not have power to escape it, but because he made a decision to deliver himself to the hands of men. They would kill him, but Jesus would rise after three days, according to the redemptive plan of God.

What was the response of his disciples to the second prediction of Jesus about his death and resurrection? When they heard it for the first time, they opposed it strongly to the point that Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. However, this time they did not oppose it. ✓ Rather, they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it (32). Why did they not understand? It was because they did not want to accept it from their hearts. They were not interested in that kind of teaching, but rather they were more interested in earthly things. If we were in their situation, we would do the same thing.

Then, what were they interested in? When they were in a house in Capernaum, Jesus asked his disciples: *“What were you arguing about on the road?”* (33) Jesus knew their hearts and what they were arguing about. However, Jesus asked this question to teach them a very important lesson. What was the reaction of the disciples? They kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest (34). They could not answer Jesus’ question because they knew that Jesus would not approve of their argument and motives behind it. We argue when we disagree with one another trying to persuade those who have different opinions. Peter believed that he was the chief of the disciples, thus he was the greatest among them. But John believed that he was the most beloved disciple, thus he was the greatest. Matthew believed that he was the greatest because he had a master’s degree in taxation while the others did not have even a bachelor’s degree. Simon the Zealot believed that he was the greatest because he was the only one who understood the political world. Thomas doubted everything, so he argued against all of them. But why did they argue about who was the greatest in that moment? It was because they believed that Jesus would destroy the Roman Empire and restore the kingdom of Israel soon. They thought that Jesus would form his cabinet and one of them would be the prime minister. They wondered who would occupy the greatest position.

To be great is a common desire of all human beings, which is good because our God is great (Dt 7:21; Ps 48:1, 95:3, etc.). God’s promise to Abraham was: *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing”* (Ge 12:2). Jesus also said, *“whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven”* (Mt 5:19b). The problem is not to be great, but a wrong concept of being great. The divine concept of being great became distorted by the worldly concept of being great. In the world, many people associate greatness with the achievement of richness, power, authority, fame, recognition, etc. Some people consider political leaders such as Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping as the greatest men in the world. Others think that the richest people such as Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, or Bill Gates are greatest. Others, especially young people, consider the top influencers on social media such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande greatest in the world. Some of

them may be great indeed because of their diligent service for others. What I am trying to say here is that many of us have an erroneous concept of greatness.

I realize that I am an ambitious man by nature. When I was a teenage boy, usually I was a leader among my friends. During my elementary school years, I served as a student leader. During my high school years, I studied hard to be the best student of my country. I got an admission from one of the best law schools in South Korea. My goal was to pass the national bar exam during my law school years and become a judge. I had the dream of becoming successful and powerful in my society. Why? It was because I believed that to be successful and powerful was the way to be great and happy. Many of you probably had similar experiences. Maybe some of us are still pursuing worldly ambitions to be great and happy.

What is the teaching of Jesus about who is the greatest? Verse 35 says, “*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’*” Jesus did not tell them who was the greatest among his disciples, but taught them how they could be greatest saying, “*Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.*” In the Jewish culture of that period, “first” meant rulers, aristocrats, ruling priests, and other persons of authority and influence. Thus, to be “last” and “servant” was to be someone with no rank, no authority, no privilege, which is a status that humans usually do not desire. The teaching of Jesus was paradoxical from the point of view of this world; however, it was the right answer from the point of view of the kingdom of God. Jesus wanted to rectify the distorted concept of being great that his disciples had in their mind and teach them the values of the kingdom of God by saying, “*Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.*” In the kingdom of God, the greatest are those who are the very last and the servant of all. It requires a radical change of our value system to accept this teaching of Jesus. Therefore, if we want to be great in the kingdom of God, we must discard our worldly concept of greatness, and keep the kingdom concept in our mind and practice it in our daily lives.

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was a professor at Harvard University, but he resigned from Harvard and moved to the L’Arche community to serve people with learning disabilities in 1985. He tells in his book titled *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections On Christian Leadership* that his movement from Harvard to L’Arche made him aware in a new way how much his own thinking about Christian leadership had been affected by the desire to be relevant, the desire for popularity, and the desire for power. He points out that one of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power—political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power—even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are. The Dutch priest claims that the way of the Christian leader is not the way of *upward mobility* in which our world has invested so much, but the way of *downward mobility* ending on the cross. It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest. This kind of leadership is radically different from the leadership seen in the world. It is a servant leadership in which the leader is a vulnerable servant who needs the people as much as they need their leader. Robert Greenleaf, the author of *Servant Leadership*, points out that the servant leader is not leader first, but servant first. The leader-first and the servant-first are extremely different. Some people say that when they become leaders, they will serve their communities. But the right way is to serve first, which brings one to aspire to lead. This is the principle and value system of the kingdom of God, as Jesus teaches us saying, “*Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.*”

I realize that I am still looking for *upward mobility* in the world and the church. I heard from some coworkers of our UBF community that I was an exemplary missionary for my success in discipleship and self-supporting ministry in Venezuela. While my wife and I were serving campus ministry in that country, our church grew in number to have around 100 participants in Sunday Worship Service. We transferred leadership to Venezuelan local leaders successfully and the church grew even more under local leadership, which was an ideal case for cross-cultural missionary work. I had failed in different businesses many times. However, God blessed my business finally and I could earn enough money to support my family, my church, and my future plans. However, my success was putting my own soul in danger. When I was kidnapped ten years ago, I felt my incompetency deeply and had to rediscover my identity truly. As a consequence, I emptied myself from business and ministry by coming to the US for my theological study. For a while, my wife and I felt lonely in a new land missing our brothers and sisters in Venezuela. But I started again my *upward mobility* doing my best in my study and completed my master's degree in divinity in 3 years. I am pursuing a Ph.D. degree in Theology and working at this prestigious church as a pastor. I have been very busy during the last 10 months after moving to Chicago for serving God's ministry, I believe. But through the last missionaries and national leaders conference I realized that I had missed the most important thing of my life, that is to know Christ. I was working hard, but I was not learning from Jesus. I repented of my spiritual disorientation and renewed my decision to know Christ first. Now, this teaching of Jesus: "*Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all*" makes me reexamine the direction of my life if I am looking for *upward mobility* or *downward mobility*. Once again, I confess that I am an ambitious man by nature. Hence, if I do not take *downward mobility* intentionally, I would be swept away by *upward mobility*. This is the reason why I must remember the teaching of Jesus repeatedly: "*Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.*"

Jesus illustrated his teaching by taking a little child in his arms and saying 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*" (37). In Jesus' time, listening to "children's talk" was thought to be a waste of time. To welcome a little child requires a lot of patience and a serving heart. But anyone who wants to be first must be a servant of the least powerful and influential person such as a child. I am a little shy with children because of my poor English doubting if they can understand what I say. One day Matthew and Sunny's family visited my home with their three children—Titus, Timmy, and Tristen. They are very lovely and friendly. Their first son Titus loves talking. He came to me without any hesitation and talked to me many things. I had to listen to him carefully because I could not fully understand what he was saying. I tried to respond to him and surprisingly he understood very well. I breathed a sigh of relief. To welcome a little child in the name of Jesus means to welcome a child as we welcome Jesus. Jesus tells us that whoever welcomes a little child welcomes him and the Father in heaven.

However, the disciples did not accept their master's teaching deeply. When they saw someone driving out demons in the name of Jesus, they told him to stop it (38a). Why? It was because he was not one of them (38b). We do not know who that man was and how he could receive the power of driving out demons in the name of Jesus. But an obvious fact is that he did not belong to the disciples' group. Therefore, the disciples took a position against him thinking that he had not been authorized by Jesus and their group to drive out demons in the name of Jesus. It seems that the disciples considered driving out demons in the name of Jesus as their exclusive privilege. They had a sense of superiority, exclusivism, and elitism for being in the closest circle of Jesus.

What was the response of Jesus to the disciples? He told them, “Do not stop him.” Why? It was because he was not against them. Verse 40 says, *“For whoever is not against us is for us.”* Jesus did not order his disciples to investigate him in terms of his doctrines and practices, nor did Jesus invite him to join his disciples’ group. Jesus just let him work because he was not against Jesus and his disciples. Maybe his style of driving out demons could be a little bit different from the disciples’ style. Maybe his knowledge of Jesus could be less than the disciples’ knowledge of Jesus. However, Jesus accepted that person and his ministry as it was because he was not against Jesus and his gospel. Jesus accepted him with an open mind. This is the Christ-centered point of view and the vision of the kingdom of God.

We are living in a world where the unity of Christian communities is required more than ever before. Many Christian leaders and theologians urge the importance of unity among different Christian communities and try to make it. However, it has not been successful so far because we hear more about division than unity. It is not an easy task at all to be united even in a small church because of many differences in character, personality, experience, perspective, knowledge, doctrine, practice, and so on. I admit that it has been very difficult for me to lead the church’s Campus Ministry Support Team (CMST) due to our different perspectives and interest, but mostly due to my lack of servant leadership. Then, how can we be united in Christ genuinely? There must be many biblical and spiritual principles to build unity in our Christian communities. ✓ However, I believe that one of the most essential qualities is humility to welcome people and groups who have different ideas and practices from mine and ours, if they are not against Jesus and the gospel. Genuine unity does not mean uniformity, but welcome of differences with open minds. We can build unity when we become servants of all and welcome others in the name of Jesus Christ. We can work together fruitfully when we serve one another humbly for the kingdom of God. During the last World Mission Report, we watched very encouraging congratulatory addresses from some Christian leaders of other organizations. They willingly accepted our invitation to congratulate our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary with Christ-centered hearts and messages. We are trying to build unity with different Christian communities for the kingdom of God. Furthermore, we can help, learn from, and work together with other campus ministries in order to expand together the kingdom of God in America and the world. The Global Project that we are participating in as our summer program is a good opportunity to work together with other campus ministries, improving our missional work for the glory of God. May God help us open up our mind more and more with the Christ-centered point of view and the vision of the kingdom of God.

Jesus continues to teach his disciples, now warning them of causing a little one to stumble. ✓ He says, *“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea”* (42). What a strong expression! The little ones of this verse are young believers. To ‘stumble’ means ‘to lose balance and fall.’ Jesus warned his disciples of being stumble blocks to young believers. When will we be stumble blocks to others? It happens when our hand causes us to stumble; when our foot causes us to stumble; when our eye causes us to stumble, which means that we can cause the young believers to stumble due to our sins. Then, what do we have to do? Jesus says that we must cut our hand off; cut our foot off; pluck our eye out in order not to be stumble blocks to others. However, it does not mean that we must do them literally because Jesus used a hyperbolic language to underscore the great importance of keeping ourselves away from sins. It is a very serious matter to cause young believers to stumble because of our sins to the point

of being thrown into hell. Therefore, what we have to do is to purify ourselves with the fire of the Holy Spirit and to be salty in this world.

Jesus told his disciples: *“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”* (Mt 5:13). How can we, the disciples of Jesus, be the salt of the earth without losing its saltiness? We can be the salt of the earth when we purify ourselves with the fire of the Holy Spirit constantly. We can be the salt of the earth when we welcome little children and young believers in the name of Jesus and help them with the word of God faithfully. We can be the salt of the earth when we become the very last and the servants of all. I pray that we can learn from our Lord Jesus who became the servant of all. May God bless each of us to be great in the kingdom of God through being the very last and the servants of all. Amen.