



**CLIMBING DOWN THE LADDER**  
**Mark 9:33-37, Mark 10:35-45**  
**November 9, 2008**

Have you ever stood in front of a mirror and been disappointed in what you saw? Well, something like that is being revealed in our lessons for today.

The Bible has a way of confronting us with a picture or image of our world and culture that is disturbing – but true.

The twelve disciples are on the road with Jesus. In **Mark 9:33** they have arrived for the night at a house in Capernaum. As they settle down for the night – Jesus asks his disciples what they were arguing about on the road. The disciples looked sheepishly at each other – but they remained quiet.

Jesus knew that everybody had been taught to climb up the ladder of success. Jesus had startled them a chapter before with the concept of the cross. It was hard for them to climb down the ladder. Jesus knew everybody had what the late great Methodist preacher J. Wallace Hamilton called the “drum major” instinct. As parents and teachers and church leaders we fall into the same pattern and participate in it without realizing what we are doing.

We all want our kids to be on the honor roll – starting members of the varsity team – first chair flute – musical prodigy – beauty queen – captain of the cheerleaders – National Honor Society member. We start climbing the ladder at an early age and never stop. We might occasionally root for the underdog – but we worship the top dog. The desire for greatness and significance is not the sort of thing we like to talk about in the church house or in religious settings. After all – even pastors want to be bishops – have the largest church in town – the best organ – be adored and successful.

The corporate world sets the model and we follow it - Chairman of the Board – King of the mountain – Ph.D. – President – the largest salary – the biggest house – the most expensive car. We seek value and worth – all the time forgetting the biblical truth – that God has already given us value and worth. Almost everyone here today has been baptized. We are sons and daughters of the living God. We have been baptized in the name of the Father – Son – Holy Spirit. We have been given a great identity.

However, we are still concerned with our place on the organizational chart – and our place at the table. Every one of us would prefer our children and grandchildren to be in the upper levels of management – rather than the lower levels.

You see – my friends – the problem with spending your life climbing the ladder of success is that you are likely to pass Jesus – on his way **down**.<sup>1</sup> Yes – all the way down to a Messiah washing feet – holding children – and touching the brow of a leper – or the eyes of a blind man. Be careful how you climb. If you devote yourself to climbing the ladder – where will it eventually lead you?

I am thankful that here in God's word – Mark does not paint halos over the 12 disciples yet. That would come later. In both our lessons today I hope you notice that Jesus did not condemn the disciples or us for our desire for greatness and significance. However, Jesus does redefine and redirect their passions and ambitions. There is a Jesus way – that is quite different from the American way.

In **Mark 9:35-36** we see that Jesus sat down and asked the twelve to join him. Whenever a Jewish Rabbi was to teach his students – he would sit. This would be the signal for them to gather at his feet and listen closely. This is where we get the phrase “to learn at someone's feet.”

In **verse 36** it shares: “He took a little child and had him stand among them.” It was an object lesson so to speak. Like our ladders today. He took it out of the abstract – and set it right in their world and laps.

As the late Dr. William Barclay shares: “In the first century, a child had no power or political influence at all. A child could not advance an adult's career or enhance their prestige. A child couldn't give us adult things. It is the other way around. A child needs things. A child must have things done for him/her. So Jesus is teaching ‘If a man welcomes the poor – ordinary people – the people who have no influence and no wealth and no power – the people who need things done for them – he is welcoming me. More than that – he is welcoming God.’ The child is typical of the person who needs things – and it is the society of the person who needs things that we must seek.”<sup>2</sup> These words stirred the disciples in their thinking – and caused them to swallow hard. It forces them to see the ‘ladder’ in a new way and direction.

Almost every week someone will tell me ‘Pastor, I am against abortion.’ I reply ‘That's good – so am I. Tell me – because you are against abortion – and desire to see children brought into this world as a gift from God – what Sunday School class for children are you teaching and helping with? On Wednesday night at your church, what ways are you teaching the children who come from the projects or housing development to your church? Are you taking your turn in the nursery at the church? If abortion is wrong – which it is – then not ministering to those children of God is a sin as well. Almost 50% of the children in America have only one parent – how are you ministering to these kids? The mission field is right here in American. We know the drug dealers and pimps have a plan for these children – how is your plan any different?

A friend of mine in retirement took a job driving a school bus. What an eye opening experience that was. He could not believe the language and behavior of the children. I said maybe God is placing you on the mission field – and those kids need your spiritual care.’ I hear so many adults say, “These kids today have no respect for Authority.” It is hard for children to have respect for authority when the adult population around them has no respect for authority. Ask any police officer – public school teacher – pediatrician – pastor – counselor and they will share with you that our culture only reflects what children are learning from the adult population that surrounds them. Children take time and effort. Your hands might get dirty – and your kneecaps might be aching as you are learning to climb the ladder in a new direction. Put your money and faith where your mouth is. Any fool can curse the darkness – people of faith light candles of hope and provide a greater way.

Well, we knew the disciples like us didn’t learn this new direction in one lesson. It was still simmering in their hearts and minds. We are now heading to Jerusalem with Jesus and the twelve disciples in **chapter 10**. We get an up close picture of two good Jewish boys requesting a position and power and prestige from Jesus. We would expect this from the military mind-set of the Roman Empire – but not the Master’s Men. We know of their training and mind set for economic and political power - but surely not in the Master’s men.

However, when James and John approach our Lord in **verses 35 and 36** with the request of privileged seats and positions in the kingdom of God – it comes as no surprise to him. Jesus knows our hearts better than anyone else.

Now in all fairness to James and John – they – along with Peter were part of the Inner Circle. They wanted to stay close to Jesus. They had seen the might and power of Rome. However, they also had seen the crowds follow Jesus – and the power present in Jesus. He had stilled the waves, cast out demons, healed the sick, walked on water, fed the crowds, battled the Pharisees, and touched the untouchables.

Once again – Jesus did not scold them, but again he must show them the greater and more excellent way. James and John and the other 10 disciples knew how kingdoms were established and made. One group destroyed the other. It was revolution time. Yes, when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, “The bad guys at the head table would be removed – their chairs fumigated and God’s new crew would be seated. Their new king and the loyal members of his campaign staff would be rewarded with the good seats at either side of the King.”<sup>3</sup> This is what we are in the midst of now as Barack Obama’s team prepares to assume leadership of our country in January. Who will be the new Secretary of State – and the list goes on. What changes will really take place in our nation’s capitol?

Well, the disciples knew great change was coming as Jesus set them down again for an important ‘chalk talk.’ In the midst of this gathering Jesus declares that greatness in his kingdom would not be defined by position, title, wealth, education, or social status – but by the individual’s willingness to accept the role of a servant – and

serve. As our Beth Keretzman reminded us “**Service is not spelled S-E-R-V-E U-S.**” This new direction would take awhile for the disciples to digest and understand. It does for us all.

Dr. William Cannon, who was one of our great United Methodist Bishops of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote: “Greatness in life does not come from what people do for us – or from the exalted position we may hold in their eyes. Greatness does come from what we do for others – and from the privileges and advantages we give up on their behalf. Therefore he who desired to be first in Jesus’ eyes must be last in the eyes of secular-minded people.”<sup>4</sup>

One of my favorite spiritual writers – Henri Nouwen – died a few years ago. Just before his death, he wrote and shared about a transformational experience in his life. He had all the credentials – titles – and degrees. He taught at Harvard – Yale – and Notre Dame. His writings were well-received by the entire body of Christ. He was a popular author – much sought after seminar leader and speaker. People sought him out. **He was at the top of the ladder.** However, he began to feel a restlessness in his soul and spirit. As he climbed the ladder to the top – he missed Jesus coming down. He began to miss the sound of the soft-sandaled feet of Jesus in the night. So, God led him to become a chaplain at a community for severely mentally retarded children called Daybreak in Toronto, Canada. The kids couldn’t read – so they never read his books. They did not know him from Adam. They never heard of Harvard or Yale. They did not know he was a spiritual giant. They could not advance his career. However, in his journal he wrote these mentally retarded children increased his ability to love and serve as Jesus did. The name of his book is entitled, **IN THE NAME OF JESUS**. He climbed down the ladder – and found Jesus in so doing.

In closing – let me share the greatest climbing down the ladder story ever written. It is found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the book of Philippians. Listen closely:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus;  
Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality  
with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross!  
Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place –  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and  
under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory  
of God the Father.”

Yes, the way of the Crown is the way of the Cross. It was for Jesus. It will be for us as well.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

November 9, 2008

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> John Ortberg, **PREACHING**, September/October, 2008 edition, page 10.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, **“The Daily Study Bible Series, THE GOSPEL OF MARK,”** revised edition, 1075, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, page 253-254.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, **BREAD OF ANGELS**, Crowley Publications, Boston, MA, 1997, page 43 (my adaptation of it).

<sup>4</sup> William R. Cannon, **JESUS THE SERVANT**, Upper Room Publications, 1978, page 69.

PASTOR’S NOTE: During the service there were 4 ladders stationed at various places in the chapel.

The 2 ladders in the front were used in a creative way. I had 2 young adults from our church ascend and descend the ladders at 3 different places in the sermon. Almost everyone said what a powerful effect it had.