

### Mark 9:30-37

<sup>30</sup> They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, <sup>31</sup> because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." <sup>32</sup> But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

<sup>33</sup> They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" <sup>34</sup> But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

<sup>35</sup> Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

<sup>36</sup> He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> "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."

As a general rule, ambition is a good thing. Having that drive to get better at something, to do a better job, to learn more, to excel at what we're doing, helps us in so many areas of life. Whether it's at our job or just at a hobby, ambition is a valuable quality. We even get concerned when we see children that seem to lack ambition. We worry about how they will do later in life and concern whether they struggle with laziness because it doesn't look like they have any drive. But is there ever a time that ambition isn't such a good thing? Is there ever a time that having ambition and drive can do us not good, but harm? That it can drive us, not into better productivity and self-improvement, but into some sort of self-destruction? That's what Jesus and his disciples were discussing in our Gospel for today.

It was near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. He was passing through Galilee, the northern part of Israel, for the last time. This had become home for him, Capernaum, his adopted hometown, was in Galilee, and this is the last time he would be here before he died in Jerusalem. So what would you expect Jesus to be doing? If he's on his way to Jerusalem to be crucified, and wouldn't come back here again, we might think that this would be a flurry of activity for Jesus. This was the last chance for these people to get to know Jesus, and to believe in him, and so Jesus had to do everything he could to reach as many as he could while he was still there. Running from morning till night, sleeping just a few hours, then back at it again the next morning. We'd think this should have looked like the last few shopping days before Christmas, with Jesus in a frenzy trying to reach as many people as he possibly could, never slowing down, never stopping for a break, just out trying to reach people for the last time.

That's what we might expect, but that's not what we see at all. Instead we see Jesus hoping to keep his visit a secret. Mark tells us, "Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were." Does that sound strange? Shouldn't he have been out telling people what he was about to do? What could be more important than that? Listen to the rest of that sentence: "Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples." He was taking this time, while he still had it, for some private Bible study with his disciples. That really ought to be a little jarring to us, who so often claim to not have time for Bible study, whether it be at home or more formally here at church, because we're so busy. We have so many other more important things to do that we can't take the time to study the Bible. Look at our Savior. Did he have other important things he could have been doing? Most definitely! But none of them were more important than taking the time to study with and teach his disciples.

That study is even more important when we see what they were studying. "Jesus said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.'" I think we can sometimes have the impression that all the things that happened to Jesus – his arrest and trial and beating and crucifixion – that these things all blindsided the disciples. They didn't know how to handle it, and they ended up handling it very poorly, denying Jesus, running away in fear, because they didn't see it coming. But actually, the Bible tells us the exact opposite. More than once, Jesus had told his disciples exactly what was going to happen. And it wasn't just a quick lesson. The original Greek in this verse says literally that Jesus "kept on" teaching his disciples, that this wasn't just one quick lesson, but it was a process, over a period of time as they walked through Galilee, where Jesus was explaining to his disciples what would happen to him, and why it had to happen. But the disciples didn't get it. Maybe they didn't understand because they didn't want to understand. Maybe they thought these things wouldn't really happen to Jesus. Maybe they thought that they could prevent it from happening. Maybe they were

being influenced by wrong ideas about who the Messiah would be. Many people at that time thought that the Messiah would be this great earthly ruler, who would set up a powerful kingdom on earth, bringing back the glory days of David and Solomon. Did the disciples fall into that? Right after Jesus is teaching them about his suffering, death and resurrection, what argument do they start? Jesus knows it, even though they didn't want to tell him about it. They were arguing about which of them was the greatest, which fits very well into the idea of who was going to have the positions of power when Jesus started to rule his kingdom. Jesus is trying to tell them about his true mission, what he had come to do – to suffer and die and rise again – and the disciples are acting like kids on a playground, arguing about who's number one, or who's “the man.”

From a certain perspective, someone could admire their ambition, their drive. They didn't want to settle for second best, which is a trait the world encourages. But the disciples knew that Jesus wouldn't, which is why they were afraid to even tell him about their argument. Yet once again we see how the disciples so often show us how we are. How easy is it for us to get caught up in that game of comparing ourselves to other people, and looking to get all the glory we think we deserve? How much of our life do we make a competition, over who has the better job or the bigger house or the faster car?

We can even turn our kids into a competition, bragging, inwardly at least, that ours are smarter or more talented or better behaved. So often our ambition, our drive, is to make ourselves look better, even if it comes at the expense of others. That same type of misguided ambition can even work its way into the church. We can be tempted to think that the church should always be growing, outwardly, and that if we're not, then we must be doing something wrong. We can look to the church up the street and think, “They're growing. They must be doing something right. We need to do what they're doing.” The technical term that theologians have for that is the “theology of glory.” It's the same problem the disciples had. They were looking for outward rewards for following Jesus. They were driven to be the best, to be first.

But Jesus isn't about the theology of glory. He had just been teaching his disciples, and he would teach them again, and eventually they would understand, that Jesus was about the theology of the cross. For Jesus' entire earthly life, the cross was his focus. That's why he was here. He was and is the Son of God, and certainly could rightly have demanded that all people serve him and give him the honor and glory due him. But instead, he came not to be served, but to serve. He was driven, not to be first, but to be last, to put everybody else ahead of himself. And the highest example of that is the cross. He knew that our sins had separated us from God, and would lead to an eternity in hell, and that wasn't his fault, that was all on us. But out of his love for us, he became our servant, to do what it took to rescue us. He suffered what he didn't deserve, but he suffered it for us, in our place, so that we wouldn't have to. He took away everything that would keep us out of heaven, and gave us what we needed to enter heaven – the perfect life that he lived, that he deposited into our account. The cross is why he was here, what his life was all about. He never wavered from that focus, until as the Lamb of God, he had taken away the sin of the world.

The cross is then also what we're all about. It becomes the center of our lives, first and foremost, because that is our source of life. It's at the cross, and only at the cross, that we find forgiveness for our sins. So it's to the cross that we run when we need forgiveness. And then the love that our Savior showed us there inspires our love, for him, and for others. And so, having found our motivation at the cross, we can also find our example there. We make it our ambition, our drive, to be like Jesus. If the sinless Son of God can serve lowly me, even to the point of giving up his life for me, how could I ever claim to be above anybody else? Just like Jesus, we seek, not to be served, but to serve. That's what our drive is. “If anyone wants to be first,” Jesus said, “he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” We don't care about recognition. We don't care about glory. We don't care about being better than everyone else, or anyone else. Our drive is to be like our Savior. And so our drive is to serve, to serve our Savior, and to serve others with the love of our Savior. So go ahead and have ambition, have that drive, but have the drive to be like Jesus, and make it a drive to serve, a drive to be last. Amen.

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