



## Sermon of September 21, 1997



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### "BLIND AMBITION"

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

There's a story about a man whose great ambition was to become a general in the army. He imagined all the attention he would get, everybody saluting him, somebody to drive him around, all the perquisites of that high rank. One day he reached his goal. He was promoted to Brigadier General.

The next day he moved into his new office, sat behind his new, big desk. He could just feel the power emanating from that office. His aide walked in, said, "There's a man here to see you." The general said, "Send him right in."

He thought, "I'm going to impress this man with how important I am, how much power I have." He turned around, picked up the phone, and pretended that he was talking to the President of the

United States. He said, "Mr. President, I understand what you are saying to me. I think your idea is a good one, and I can tell you that I will share it with the Secretary of Defense when I see him tomorrow. Thank you for calling. Goodbye sir."

He hung up the phone, turned around, and saw this ordinary soldier standing there. The general barked at him, "What can I do for you young man." The soldier said, "Nothing sir. I'm just here to hook up your phone." /

I love that story. We like to see people's pretenses punctured like that. Actually, there are a lot of phone calls made from the White House nowadays. Some phone calls are coming in, but I guess most of them are going out. They all have to do with power, privilege and prestige. The White House is a magnet for ambition. I suppose it has always been that way, because the White House is the symbol of power in our society. Remember John Dean, one of the several aides in the Nixon administration, who after the Watergate crisis, had a conversion of sorts, and then wrote a book about the experience. John Dean's book was entitled, *Blind Ambition*. And that is what our text for this morning is about.

Jesus is on his way with his disciples to Jerusalem. Walking along the road he is talking about what lies ahead, what they can expect when they get there. He says, "The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and be killed, and will rise again."

The journey to Jerusalem takes up three chapters in the Gospel of Mark. It is a major part of the story. Throughout these three chapters there are predictions of the passion, and this is one of them. "The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and be killed, and will rise again." Mark says of the disciples, "They did not understand what he was saying, and they were afraid to ask."

That evening they came to Capernaum. They found a place to spend the night. I think it was at supper, sitting around the table, that Jesus asked, "What were you discussing along the way?" They were silent because what they were discussing was, which one of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom.

Ambition. Blind ambition. He was talking to them about how the Son of Man was going to have to die. They knew what he was talking about. I believe that. We may not understand what is meant by "the Son of Man," but they understood what was meant by it. It was the common title for the Messiah in that century. There were several titles for the Messiah, and each title represented a certain way of thinking about the Messiah: who he will be, what he will do when he comes. So when Jesus said, back there on the road, "The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and be killed, and will rise again," they understood what he was saying, but they did not ask, because they didn't want to hear about it.

They heard what they wanted to hear. "The Son of Man is about to appear." That meant to them that the showdown is about to happen. The Kingdom is about to come. When the Kingdom comes, then those who are with the Messiah will have special places in the Kingdom. Especially the Messiah's disciples. That is what they were talking about back there. When the Messiah sits at the banquet table in his Kingdom, which one of them will be at his right hand and which one at his left hand?

I tell you, it must have been quiet at the table for the longest time after Jesus asked, "What were you talking about?" Nobody said anything. Then Jesus broke the silence. He said, "Whoever wants to be first, must be last and the servant of all."

That is our text. I learned a long time ago that not everybody is going to hear that text the way it is supposed to be heard. Several years ago I was on a panel discussing Liberation Theology. I support much of what Liberation Theology represents. I find strong biblical evidence for it. Especially for that phrase that comes out of Latin American Liberation Theology, that "God has a preferential option for the poor." I just don't see how you can read the Bible and not reach the conclusion that God has a preferential option for the poor.

But there are other passages in the Bible that suggest that liberation is not the only thing the Bible proclaims to us. It also calls us to be humble, and to be the servant of all.

I pointed that out, as a member of this panel. Afterwards a woman theologian came up to me and said, "Do you realize what many women feel when they hear those passages about being humble and being last?" I confessed that I thought they read them the same way that I read them, the right way. It is the only way you could possibly read them.

She pointed out that there are many factors that determine how one will hear a text. She said, if you have been taught all your life that your role in this life is to be the servant, in the sense of being subservient to other people, or taught that you have been given a certain place in this life by destiny, or even by God, and you are to stay in that place, then when you read these passages about humility and about being last, you will hear them differently than someone who has been raised with the wisdom that says you can be anything you want to be in this life, and there is nothing standing in your way except yourself to become who you want to be. We hear these passages differently depending on the context from which we come.

I guess that was my first awakening, and there have been many since, to reveal that there are certain texts that probably ought to have asterisks next to them to mean, maybe this isn't for you. In this case, Jesus is addressing twelve men who thought they were going to be number one, who were going to have all this power and lord it over other people. He told them, "If you would be first, you must become last. If you would be leaders of other people, you must become the servant."

Those are called "hard sayings" in the gospel. He uttered the hard sayings to the strong. To the weak and the oppressed he offered "comfortable sayings," words of promise and hope about the future, words of liberation, saying, you do not have to live this way. You can be free and reach the fulfillment of your life. Those are the comfortable words.

The greatest distortion of scripture is for those who are strong to assume that the hard saying are not addressed to them, but to those people who are already oppressed, or already last in this world, in order to keep them in their place, and the comfortable words are addressed to those who are already comfortable, to give them an easy conscience about their condition. My observation is that that kind of abuse goes on all the time. And that is why, as heretical as it might sound, I sometimes tell people, this passage may be the Word of God, but it is not necessarily the word God wants you to hear right now. Maybe later, but not now.

I know people who have been raised to believe that they are not worth very much, and who act out that image of themselves in their lives. I can't believe that God wants them to humble themselves and to be last. God wants them to stand tall, and to be proud, and to be free to seize the life that God has given to them.

So this passage may not be for everyone. But it is probably for you, so I want you to listen to it. I think it is saying this. Ambition can mislead you in this life. In fact, ambition can blind you to what is really important in this life.

We live in an age in which it is preached that success is everything and, therefore, everything else can be sacrificed to achieve that goal. So dominant has this cult of success become, that people even interpret Christianity as a part of it. I have heard people testify that their discipleship to Jesus has meant that they have received all these wonderful material blessings. But Jesus didn't come to show us how to be successful. Jesus came to show us that there are some things that are more important than success.

This passage makes that abundantly clear. It tells us that the needs of other people around us are more important than our success. Jesus poured out his heart to his friends. These twelve men lived with him for three years. They are his closest friends. He has just told them, "I'm going to die," and they paid no attention. "They didn't understand, and they were afraid to ask."

Somebody says, "I lost my job," or, "I lost my marriage," or, "I got word from the lab yesterday." That is when you need friends to put aside everything else and come and be with you, stay with you, sacrifice something for you.

I, like all ministers, preside over a lot of funerals. So often I hear a member of the family say, "He came. He was on the east coast for a meeting, but he dropped everything when he heard, got an early plane, and he came." He didn't do anything else. He just came. And nothing else that day meant more than that gesture.

Jesus told them, "I think I'm going to die." The Son of Man, he said, is not going to come on a cloud as you anticipate, be a warrior and beat everybody up, and establish the Kingdom here on earth. That's not going to happen. This is the way it is going to happen. I'm going to give my life for you. Mark says, "They didn't understand, and they were afraid to ask."

I think they understood. I think they understood, but their ambition wouldn't let them hear it. It didn't fit into the world that their ambition had structured, so they had no place for it. It didn't fit, so they didn't ask.

We live in a society that says, there is nothing more important than getting to the top and having power and riches, and it condones almost anything to get you there, including ignoring the needs of those people around you. Even ignoring the needs of those people who are the closest to you.

Christian faith stands over against such thinking, and it says, if your ambition blinds you to the needs of other people, then it is wrong. It's just wrong. Jesus offers us an alternative way of living, and it is right here in this text. He says, "He who would be first among you, let him be last and the servant of all."

Sports have always been important in American life. In previous generations, though, I think it was a little different. I don't want to be too romantic about this, but I think in previous generations sports were used to teach character. I can remember the coaches I had in school and how important they were in my life, because they saw their role as coaches as to change boys into men with character, principles and courage. They saw sport as a means of teaching young people what life was really about: hard work, perseverance, team work, sportsmanship, winning humbly and losing graciously. Things like that.

Sport is still important in American life. In fact, television has made sports even more influential than ever before. And sports are still teaching us lessons, but most of all two: the importance of winning, and the importance of making money and the unimportance of everything else.

Something has happened in this country. I think everybody senses that. Everybody feels that something has happened. I think we are beginning to realize what it might be. I ran across an article written at the beginning of the baseball season by Henry Aaron in honor of Jackie Robinson. This is the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's coming into the major leagues. Henry Aaron wrote a wonderful tribute to him. And get this. In that article he said what made Jackie Robinson great was that he was willing to humble himself.

Jackie Robinson was a proud man. He had a quick temper. But he and Branch Rickey determined that the strategy for changing things in the world of baseball was for Robinson to humble himself. Robinson's restraint during those days in the face of prejudice was heroic on his part.

But Aaron wrote that there was another dimension to Robinson's humility. He pointed out that Robinson did not do what he did for himself alone. He did what he did primarily for other people. He knew that if he was successful, that other people would be able to follow him.

Henry Aaron said that he could remember in 1947, as a teenager, his father took him to an exhibition baseball game when the Dodgers were playing in Alabama, and Jackie Robinson was in a Dodgers uniform. It was something they thought they would never ever see. Henry Aaron said, "That day I knew that I could do that too."

Then he asked, "What are players in professional sports doing today?" He meant both black and white. What are they doing today? He said that today their ambition blinds them to those people who are still trapped in the prison of hopelessness and poverty, young people who could be helped by successful people paying attention to them. Not only would these athletes today not think of humbling themselves for the sake of other people, but they blatantly announce, as models for our society, that their only concern is for themselves.

And society supports that. That is the model that is lifted up in our society, not just by athletes, but nearly universally the model is that to live a successful life you can think only of yourself.

In the context of this sermon, that can simply be called "blind ambition." Ambition that blinds us to what is really important in this life, what is essential for life to be meaningful.

Around that table at Capernaum, Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you talking about on the road?" They were silent, because they were talking about which one of them was going to be the

greatest. Jesus said, "If you would be first, then be last and the servant of all."

*I From Norman Neaves*

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*Help us to be masters of ourselves,  
that we might be servants of others,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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