

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras
Mark 9:30-37 who is the greatest
September 23, 2018

Jesus and his disciples lived in an era where classism was deeply rooted in their culture and the Roman social structure. Social class in ancient Rome was hierarchical. Roman society was divided into the upper class and lower class. There was no middle class and little opportunity for improving one's lot. The lower class comprised about 97 percent of the population.ⁱ According to N.T, scholar Warren Carter, Rome's legal system "protected elite wealth and status, and employed punishments appropriate not to the crime but to the social status of the accused."ⁱⁱ The Romans believed that they were "destined to rule. Others such as "Jews and Syrians were born for servitude."ⁱⁱⁱ The disciples were arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. They thought that they were the greatest among men. It was normal to have this discussion in the first century C.E. A person's status determines one's survival under the Roman military occupation of Palestine.

Jesus turns his disciples' attention to the actual greatest. He talks about servanthood. The servant, not the ruler is the greatest. Jesus reversed of what would be expected in the first century CE. Jesus challenges the social hierarchy of ancient Rome. The Emperor and the elites were on the top and slaves were at the bottom. According to Jesus' teaching, servanthood is related to discipleship and dedication to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus goes farther in his explanation by saying “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (v. 37). The child is a good example of one who would be regarded “last of all” in the social structure in the ancient world. The high infant mortality contributed to marginalizing children. Children were necessary to continue the family name. But they were vulnerable and without rights.

Due to poverty, deformities, and gender some parents were compelled either to kill their newborn children or leave them on the street for their fate with hope one will pick them up and raise them.^{iv} Unfortunately, the survived children became slaves or worked in brothels. Very few were adopted and raised within family.

Jesus invites his disciples to welcome the most vulnerable person in society. To welcome a powerless child is to welcome not only Jesus but also God the Father. In our context, a child represents the poor who depend on the government for their survival or could be people with PTSD, HIV, mentally ill, addicts, rebellious teens, and prisoners. These people are vulnerable, and Jesus asks us to welcome them in his name.

It seems that the disciples were trying to distinguish between insiders and outsiders in their community. But Jesus teaches his disciples and us that the one who appears to be outside may be an insider. “Furthermore, those who are confident of their status as insiders may put themselves outside by their treatment of weak believers or by self-indulgent behavior.”^v Jesus turns our attention to true humility and true discipleship. Jesus cares about the attitude of your heart toward those whom our society consider insignificant.

Jesus who loves us and became a servant for our sake is calling you and me to imitate him by serving others and welcoming those who are different than us. Everyone will be an outsider one time in their life. I felt like an outsider few times in my life. It is not fun. Can the outsider be the insider? Is it possible to open your heart to the outsiders and welcome them in the name of Jesus? The greatest Christian is the one who opens one’s heart for the marginalized and serves them in the name of Christ.

ⁱ Carter, Warren. *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Essential Guides) (p. 10). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Carter, Warren. *The Roman Empire*, p. 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carter, Warren. *The Roman Empire*, p. 15. 10

^{iv} Mindy Nichols, *Did Ancient Romans Love Their Children? Infanticide in Ancient Rome* (n.p: Western Oregon University, 2008), 2-3.

^v Sharyn Echols Dowd , *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Incorporated, 2016) , 98