

JESUS: THE SERVANT AT WORK

VOLUME TWO

STUDY FIFTEEN

A Cross . . . A Crown . . . A Child

Mark 9:30–37

Jesus has wisdom for us to learn, and so we must learn it—we who are given to conceited plans and self-importance.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

THE smell of “competition” fills the air as the three young executives file into the boardroom. They’ve come to present their concepts to the trustees for growing the company. The winning plan will earn the presenter a ticket to the top—high salary, cushy perks, more staff, and the coveted corner office. They’ll do whatever it takes to get ahead . . . even if it means stepping over one another along the way. In their world, that’s just the way it is.

The desire to be great, however, isn’t just for success-driven executives. We all long to feel important and to be admired. In our ears, we hear the whispers of subtle temptation to build our own little kingdoms where we sit on the throne as others serve our interests.

Jesus’ disciples heard pride’s tantalizing song. While their Master was foretelling His suffering, death, and resurrection, the question humming in their minds was, *What size crown will I wear in Jesus’ kingdom?*

In the passage for this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, Jesus ushers His disciples into His classroom, where He has enrolled them in Leadership 101 to learn the essential qualities of servanthood. It’s a required course in kingdom living for all Jesus’ disciples. Let’s take a seat beside Peter, James, and John—and enjoy our Master’s words.



INSIGHT FOR LIVING



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SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES
BIBLE STUDIES

A Cross . . . A Crown . . . A Child

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you pause to seek the Lord's help in your study, ask Him to open your eyes to the truths hidden in His Word.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

For two years, Jesus had been preaching the kingdom of God, which is the opposite of the kingdom of this world. In God's kingdom, the core values are love, not hate. Humility, not pride. Faith, not fear. Forgiveness, not revenge. Trust, not worry. The disciples could probably repeat Jesus' teaching on these subjects . . . but knowledge doesn't always equate to wisdom. The facts in their heads stopped short at the bridge to their hearts.

Because the disciples would one day carry on Jesus' ministry, Jesus spent the remainder of His time on earth making certain His disciples not only knew His teaching but lived it. To train them, Jesus would have to pull them out of the current of their culture. Then, as now, greatness was measured by influence and status. In our passage, Jesus challenged His disciples to see leadership in a different light—in the new world of His countercultural kingdom.



Observation: A Cross, a Crown, a Child

Read [Mark 9:30–37](#) thoroughly and thoughtfully, as if you're reading it for the first time. Observation is foundational to understanding, so take your time. Read the passage aloud and with expression if that helps you focus.¹

Where the Disciples Were—Mark 9:30, 33

Through what region did Jesus and His disciples travel in Mark 9:30? Watch them walk through familiar places and imagine their chitchat with family and friends. Where did they arrive, according to 9:33?

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What They Needed to Know and Remember—Mark 9:31–37

Observe the mission of their Master in Mark 9:31–32. Note the particle *for*, which explains the prior sentence. Why did Jesus not want anyone to know He was in Galilee? What message did He give His disciples about Himself? Why do you think the disciples responded as they did?

They're going to nail Him to a cross, and He's going to hang there until He dies. He's going to be buried, and then three days later He's going to rise from the grave. But Mark says that they didn't understand it and were afraid to ask Him.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Observe the shift from “cross” to “crown” in 9:33–35. Jesus could sense the competition in the air while walking with His disciples. What were they discussing on the road? What did Mark reveal to his readers about their discussion? What did Jesus say to them?

Can you believe that? They are in denial. They retreated into one of their favorite subjects: Which of them is going to wear the crown?
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Observe Jesus' message on servanthood in 9:36–37. Sitting there, Jesus saw a little child—perhaps playing nearby—and welcomed him or her to His side. What then did He do with the child, and what did He say?

For years I used to teach that this was telling us to be like a child. It's not that. Never once does He say, “Be like a child.” The emphasis is on receiving the child.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Interpretation: Jesus' Mission and Message

After Jesus said He would be arrested, killed, and raised from the grave on the third day, His disciples “didn’t understand what he was saying” (Mark 9:32). What do you think clouded their understanding?

They were “afraid to ask him what he meant” (9:32). Look up [Matthew 16:21–23 and 17:22–23](#) in the MSG and the J. B. Phillips translations. Why were the disciples afraid?

What did Jesus mean when He said, “Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else” (Mark 9:35)? Try to state in your own words Jesus’ definition of *greatness*.

Jesus illustrated greatness by taking a child in His arms, saying, “Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me” (9:37). In the first century, children were considered least significant, often overlooked, and devalued. Look up 9:36–37 in [Constable’s Notes](#) at netbible.org for more insights on children in Greco-Roman culture. What was Jesus’ point? What principles can you glean about Christ’s path to greatness?

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This is wisdom from above. “When you see yourself as taking last position, the most insignificant in the group, a child matters to you. A child suddenly moves from insignificant to significant, especially when you see your greatness as insignificant.” At no point does the way of Jesus differ more sharply from the way of the world than on the subject of personal greatness. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: God’s Way Versus the Way of the World

Correlating [Mark 9:30–37](#) with other Scriptures shows just how different Christ’s way is from the world’s way. What about Jesus’ mission turns worldly standards upside down in [Philippians 2:1–11](#)? What should Christ’s followers expect according to [Matthew 16:24–26](#)?

Jesus is saying to these disciples, “You’re going to be abused, misused, maligned, and misunderstood. You’re going to be criticized until the end of your life. Most of you will die martyrs’ deaths. It will be that kind of life and death that will capture the attention of the world and turn it upside down. Otherwise, you blend right into the world in which you’ve been raised, and there’s no difference between you and the next selfish person who comes along.”
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

What is the contrast between Christ’s way and the world’s way in terms of leadership, as you compare our passage with [Matthew 20:24–28](#) and [John 13:1–17](#)?

The gentile world runs just like our world today. There are bosses and there are employees. There are generals and there are colonels. There are majors and there are lieutenants. And don’t you forget it. You forget there are bosses? There’s a name for you: unemployed. So, you’ve got to remember that’s the way the system works until you follow Jesus. And suddenly the tables are turned.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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How do the life and words of John the Baptist demonstrate that he understood God's definition of greatness in [John 3:26–30](#)? What important principle can we glean from his humility?

Please make sure as you get older in Christ, that He increases and you decrease. That others take precedence over what you want. Trust me. It's a lifetime lesson and it never will come easily. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Lead by Serving

Do you sometimes sense “competition” in the air when you enter a room? It's easy to lose sight of the true and eternal King and forget the message He came to give.

To avoid the slippery slope of a self-exalting mindset, let's tighten our grip on two key handholds from Jesus' teaching. First, *serving others is essential*. What has the Holy Spirit pinpointed throughout our Bible study that increases your desire to help and serve others?

If you are growing up in Christ, your desire to help and serve others becomes increasingly more important. It's part of being last. It isn't that you have no ambition. It's just that your ambition is kept in check. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Second, *personal greatness is actually incidental*. Status and admiration may or may not come. That's fine. Our focus is on serving. In what areas of your life do you find it difficult to take the posture of a servant? Why not request the Holy Spirit's assistance to reflect Jesus' model by putting on the apron of humility? Express your desire to step out of the current of our culture and follow Christ's way.

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I will tell you there's nothing that disarms individuals more quickly than seeing a person who could be great in his or her own eyes, instead be absolutely humble and serving others. And that's what Jesus wanted for the Twelve, and that's what He wants for all of us. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for opening my eyes to true wisdom. Help me embrace Your definition of greatness. May You increase in my life more and more. Help me put on the apron of humility to serve others so Your Son, the King of Kings, may be magnified in me. In His name, I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page "*How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?*" at insight.org.

For the 2026–2027 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Mirlenda Noëlliste in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2011, 2026 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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