

*Proper Posture – Mark 9:30-37*

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**September 19, 2021**

Maybe you've been there. Maybe you've been in a classroom as a student, and the teacher has just finished explaining an assignment he or she wants you to complete. At the end of the explanation, the teacher says, "Any Questions?" And because you don't want to embarrass yourself in front of your classmates you remain silent even though you don't really understand the assignment.

Or when you were in high school, you became afraid to ask questions in your math courses like algebra, geometry, and trigonometry. You remember the feeling of just not understanding the material, of feeling as though everyone was getting it but you.

You remember that ray of hope on the first day of geometry class in the ninth grade. You had a new, young teacher who waxed eloquent about the "beauty of mathematics." You felt momentarily enthused and energized, but after about your second question, she got an annoyed look on her face. You stopped asking and just muddled through with an anxious mind, memorizing formulas rather than understanding their derivations, grateful for the C at the end of the year.

Why did you become afraid to ask? Because you didn't want to look stupid in front of the teacher and your classmates. You didn't want to risk public chastisement. Apparently, your fear of how you would look in others' eyes was stronger than your desire to understand the mysteries of mathematics.

We've all been there. We've all had questions in our minds but have lacked the courage to ask them.

They are questions about more than just math. They are even more important questions—questions that when asked just might lead us to a deeper, more meaningful life.

There are some questions we're also afraid to ask ourselves, never mind asking them in front of other people. Questions like:

Am I holding onto something I need to let go of?

If I had a friend who spoke to me the same way I sometimes speak to myself, how long would I allow that person to be my friend?

In the haste of my daily life, what am I not seeing?

If I looked into the heart of my enemy, what do I think I would find that is different from what's in my own heart?

What big lesson could people learn from my life?

We are often afraid of asking these questions of ourselves. Why? Maybe it's because we'd be embarrassed to discover the answers.

There is no harm in asking. We've heard that a million times. Teachers are famous for saying it when imploring their students to ask for clarification. There are no dumb questions, they say, except the ones that don't get asked.

Let's turn to Jesus' disciples for a moment. In this passage from Mark today, they have been sitting at the feet of a great teacher. Jesus has been schooling them on many topics. And he comes to his greatest teaching—a lesson about who he is and what will happen to him.

"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

The disciples had a reputation for not "getting it" when it came to Jesus' teaching. In retrospect, nobody could blame them. His identity was just coming into full view, and they couldn't help but not understand what he meant half the time.

It's at this point that Jesus could've been heard saying, "Any questions?", hoping that they would engage in dialogue for his teaching to become clearer and for them to embrace it more fully.

And what's the disciples' response? Nothing. Crickets. Zippo. They don't utter a word because they were afraid to ask what it meant. Maybe they didn't want him to think they didn't get it, that

they were too dense to understand. Whatever the reason, they don't say a thing.

Instead of seeking Jesus out to greater understand him, instead of having the courage to be vulnerable in their relationship with him, instead of displaying their humility in confessing what they didn't know, they turn their attention to a silly conversation about which of them is the greatest.

This they have no trouble enacting—each of them making claims about how great each of them is. While having trouble admitting what they don't know, they find boisterous claims about their own greatness easy to proclaim.

It's true for us, too. It's easy to spout off about the certainties we have in our hearts—telling anybody around us who will listen what it is that must be true about the world. And yet, isn't it hard to muster up the courage to admit what we don't know and be interested in asking those questions that might unlock a greater understanding of God and our role in God's grand plan of reconciliation and redemption? Questions like:

Why do good people suffer? Why are human beings at times so brutal to each other? If God's own son is betrayed and killed, then no one is safe. Why did God set up a world like this? Why do you allow so much turmoil in the world today? Has the human race been worth saving at the price of your son's life?

These kinds of questions are hard to ask—maybe because we think as we get older that we should know the answers and we don't. Or maybe it's the fear that we won't get an answer easily or quick enough.

Instead of asking these tough questions, we yak about we think we're certain of. And that usually doesn't get us as far.

We don't attain status by what we know; the status which has real credibility comes with an admittance of what we don't know and a commitment to serve others through a posture of humility.

Again, as I've said so many times before, faith is as much about what we do as much as it is what we know. And while our questions

can lead us over time to a greater understanding, our actions of service on behalf of others can help fill the void left by the ambiguity of the answers to our questions.

In the Greek language, there are two words for *good*. *Agathos* defines the quality of something that is good in character, beneficial in effect, or useful in action. *Kalos* describes something that's not only good in quality but also has an attractive or captivating character. It is reserved for something or someone that expresses goodness in a winsome or beautiful way.

When Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others that they may see your good [*kalos*] works, and glorify your Father in heaven," he isn't preaching about doing good with one's life; Jesus is admonishing people to work out their impact on others in delightful and winsome ways.

"I am the good [*kalos*] shepherd, he says elsewhere—a reminder that shepherding for him is more than some technical skill. It's caring for people in lovely and compelling ways. When a woman pours costly ointment on Jesus' head and critics step up to call it wasteful behavior, Jesus says to them, "Let her alone; she has performed a good [*kalos*] service for me." It's not expensive ointment that makes the moment beautiful. Something in the woman's character or action is what Jesus finds lovely.

When we are working for others, when we become the last of all and the servant of all as Jesus demands here in Mark 9, we practice "kalos" love. We love winsomely and beautifully.

And having all the answers to the hard questions becomes less important. We become more willing to ask questions that don't have immediate answers and more willing to take our time in finding answers.

Have you ever asked somebody one of the hard questions that you've always been reluctant to ask—about life or faith? And asking them with a demeanor of openness and sacrifice for the other? I'd wager you never came away from the discussion with a concrete answer. And yet, I'm also willing to bet that your concern for that

person and his or her opinion set you on the road to some level of greater understanding.

So, today opens up a new opportunity to ask. Asking questions isn't a reflection of our doubt necessarily. And if it is, doubt doesn't mean we don't have faith. To ask is to express our interest in learning and growing—whether it's about math or theology. And asking is good.

The good news is that Jesus welcomes us even when we do not understand or do not know. This passage from Mark 9 closes with Jesus embracing a child, the ultimate symbol of not knowing, not understanding, immature and undeveloped. We need not fear our questions, our misunderstandings, our confusion or our curiosity in the presence of One whose "perfect love casts out all fear" (1 John 4:18).

We can ask, and we can love in the kalos style. We can be last of all and servant of all.