

What lessons could a farmer’s hen house possibly teach? My grandpa used to raise chickens and he taught me that there really is such a thing as a “pecking order” among chickens. Within the flock of hens, one of them always becomes dominant. She’ll peck away at any hen that makes her angry, or gets in her way.

At first, the other hens don’t like it and try to retaliate. When they realize they can’t win, each chicken begins to take out her frustrations on the others. That’s when the “pecking order” begins. The next strongest pecks on a weaker one, and so on and so on. Until one hen is left at the bottom of the “pecking order.”

We wouldn’t call Jesus’ flock of disciples a hen house, but there are some similarities in today’s lesson. **Jesus and his disciples came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.**

Jesus’ disciples are trying to establish a “pecking order.” Maybe it had something to do with Jesus for the second time taking Peter, James and John along with him. This time only they were with him on the mountain for his transfiguration. Earlier, only they had been with him when he healed Jairus’s daughter. So many things were puzzling these men. While they didn’t know the whole story like we do, what it did was reveal their sinful and selfish hearts.

Jesus asks them what they’re arguing about – how embarrassing for them! They probably looked at each other, then to the ground but definitely not at Jesus. They were too ashamed to admit the topic of their heated discussion.

Jesus didn’t need an answer, he already knew what they were arguing about. How else do you explain his comment: **“Anyone who wants to be first, must be the very last, and the servant of all?”** Knowing what they were talking about without hearing a word had to send a chill up their spines.

And on top of that, his definition of greatness certainly didn’t line up with theirs’.

Jesus talked about being last, about serving others. What about being first and being served by others? Jesus’ words simply added to their growing confusion. Listen to what he told them just a short time earlier: **“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”**

This is the second time Mark records a detailed reference Jesus makes to his upcoming death. And yet we’re told: **But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.** Maybe they don’t want to know because they may hear things they don’t want to hear.

We can’t criticize them. All the facts have been known for almost 2,000 years now. And yet, there are still plenty of people who refuse to understand, and admit that sin – our sin – made Jesus’ suffering and death necessary, and that his resurrection was our assurance that all sins have been paid for.

Jesus adds an element to this second death notice – **he would be delivered into the hands of men.** This is a clear reference that someone very close to Jesus would turn him over to those who wanted to kill Jesus. No wonder they were afraid to ask more questions. They wanted to put the whole idea of Jesus’ death behind them, and discuss their “pecking order” in Jesus’ kingdom.

“I’m greater than you are!” While Jesus’ disciples may have never uttered those words, they sure acted like it during their 3 years together. James and John had their mom ask which of her sons would sit at Jesus’ right and left? This sort of thing happened again and again with them. The saddest had to be when **“a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest”** in the middle of their Passover celebration the night before Jesus died.

We have the same problem too! It’s incredible how often we try to be greater than those around

us. We can't help it. We're selfish sinners by nature and will be until the day we die. That's why until then, we have to constantly work at serving and letting others go first. That doesn't come naturally.

When there is a lack of humility in our heart, what fills that space? Good old "me, myself and I" are just itching to climb in! Thinking we are better than others is a real problem! That's why Scripture has warnings against sinful pride and blessings for the humble.

- Psalm 147: **The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.**
- Psalm 149: **For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation.**
- Proverbs 3: **He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble.**
- Proverbs 16: **Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.**

To get his point across, Jesus uses one of his favorite teaching tools – a visual aid, this one happened to be breathing, to picture greatness: **He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "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."**

The disciples walked right past and didn't even notice this rug rat. But not Jesus! What a beautiful scene! Jesus wraps his big carpenter arms around the little child he's using to teach adults this lesson: *"True greatness has a lot to do with your relationship with a child."*

In God's world no service is too beneath us, not even stooping down to care for the needs of a child. True greatness is determined, not by deeds which receive the most attention, but by humble service which often goes unrecognized – like caring for and raising a child – by everyone, except your Savior.

Serving is not easy on the ego. It will involve sacrificing your time and your talents and yourself for others, even when they don't realize it or appreciate it. But it's something Jesus modelled over and over again and that he patiently teaches again and again. In that upper room before the Last Supper, who wrapped a towel around his waist? Who washed 12 sets of dirty, dusty feet? The One who came not to be served but to serve and give his perfect life to serve us. The One whose innocent death was the purchase price for our forgiveness.

Dying on the cross certainly doesn't sound like a first-place finish, does it? But you have to consider the proper perspective. Serving all in love to save sinners means ... WE ... finish first.

Jesus is so clear, isn't he? Being great is not defined by the number of people who serve you, but by the number of people you serve. And when we do it **"in Jesus' name"** – which means because we love Jesus – then we not only welcome Jesus into our hearts and lives, we get a package deal ... the Father along with his Son.

I hope we all recognize the spiritual blessings and benefits God brings to those who serve others and find satisfaction at the bottom of the *"pecking order."* But there are even more benefits. An overwhelming number of doctors, in the area of psychology, have recognized an interesting correlation among many of their patients. *"Generally speaking, those who try to help others keep their physical and mental strength longer. What kept their physical and mental health strong was their friendliness, compassion and focus on something other than themselves. Serving others energized them."*

Not sure who said this, but it makes sense: *"The mark of spiritual maturity is when a believer takes off their bib and puts on an apron."* We wear a bib when we expect others to serve us. We wear an apron when we expect to serve others. What are you wearing?