

**The Last is First**  
**Mark 9:30-37**  
**ABC 10/15/23**

George Washington Carver was born to slave parents sometime around 1864. He grew to become a brilliant scientist who discovered over 300 uses for the peanut & over 100 uses for the sweet potato. From the peanut plant, he developed paper, ink, ice cream, bread, cosmetics, dyes, candy, glue, soap, sausage, & oils. With the peanut, he found substitutes for flour, milk, cheese, & even coffee. He was a humble Christian man who gave all the glory to God for it. Listen to how he describes his own accomplishments:

*When I was young I said to God, 'God, tell me the mystery of the universe.' But God answered, 'That knowledge is reserved for Me alone.' So I said, 'God, tell me the mystery of the peanut.' Then God said, 'Well, George, that's more nearly your size.' & He told me.<sup>1</sup>*

George was a humble man. He also said,

*It is not the style of clothes one wears, neither the kind of automobile one drives, nor the amount of money one has in the bank, that counts. These mean nothing. It is simply service that measures success.<sup>2</sup>*

He summarized, *Without my Savior, I am nothing.*<sup>3</sup> His epitaph reads:

*George Washington Carver, Died in Tuskegee, Alabama, January 5, 1943. A life that stood out as a gospel of self-forgetting service. He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither he found happiness & honor in being helpful to the world...*

A year before Carver died a baby was born named Cassius Clay. We know him as Muhammed Ali.

Ali isn't known for his humility, especially in his fighting days. A few quotes:

*It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am.  
 I am the greatest, I said that even before I knew I was.  
 I'm not the greatest, I'm the double greatest.<sup>4</sup>*

Two men who accomplished great things in their fields but who had 2 very different attitudes. Ali also once said, *Humble people, I've found, don't get very far.* But the Bible is very clear that humility is a virtue we all need. How humble are you? The world says we need to be self-sufficient, self-assured, & self-reliant. But pride will render us useless to God while humility is used of Him. In

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eternalpromises.org/quotes/george-washington-carver/>

<sup>2</sup> Hourly History, *George Washington Carver: A Life From Beginning to End*, p 12

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p 39

<sup>4</sup> Ali quotes taken from [www.usatoday.com/story/sports/boxing/2016/06/03/muhammad-ali-best-quotes-boxing/85370850/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/boxing/2016/06/03/muhammad-ali-best-quotes-boxing/85370850/)

God's eyes it's the humble person who is truly great. The disciples needed to learn humility because they also battled pride. We see this clearly in Mk 9. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 3 cycles that appear in this section of Mark (8:22–10:52). In each cycle Jesus 1<sup>st</sup> predicts His death followed by some act of pride or self-interest on the part of the disciples, & then Jesus teaches on the humble & self-sacrificial role of true disciples. The 1<sup>st</sup> passion prediction (8:31) was followed by Peter's rebuke (8:32) & Jesus' teaching on cross-bearing discipleship (8:33–38). This 2<sup>nd</sup> passion prediction (9:31) is followed by the disciples' argument about who is the greatest (33–34) & then Jesus' teaching on true greatness (35–37). **30-37**

Jonathan Edwards wrote: *Pride is the worst sin. There is no other matter in which the heart is more deceitful. Pride is God's most stubborn enemy. There is no sin so much like the devil as pride.*<sup>5</sup> Pride is a sin we all fight, including the disciples.

**1. The Example of Humility** Jesus & His disciples have been in northern Israel by Caesarea Philippi & Mount Hermon. Now they hit the road for some private training. Their immediate destination is Capernaum, but Jesus knows it's only a stop on the way to His cross in Jerusalem. This is a crucial time for Jesus' disciples. They need to be prepared to be physically separated from Jesus. They need to be trained for the upcoming world-changing ministry. & Jesus knows pride is blossoming in their hearts. They're traveling south to the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee to the city of Capernaum, where Peter lives & where Jesus has based His ministry. Jesus wants privacy in order to train His disciples. As they travel, Jesus again describes His coming death & gives a true portrait of humility. **31**

Jesus is the epitome of humility. He described Himself as **gentle & humble in heart** (Mt 11:29), & demonstrated that humility throughout His life. Summing up the humility Jesus displayed in His incarnation, Paul wrote,

**Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, & being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:5–8).**

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<sup>5</sup> *Undiscerned Spiritual Pride*

Christ's **death on a cross** is the ultimate expression of His humility & is His theme in vs 31. The eternal Son of God was born a man in order to die for our sins. He came to take the punishment you deserve, to suffer in your place, to bear God's anger for your sin, & to pay the price of sin on your behalf, which is death for you. But death won't hold Him. 3 days later He'll rise from the dead, having accomplished salvation for those who believe. Notice how important this is to Jesus. **For He was teaching His disciples...** The word for connects it to the previous vs. It tells us why Jesus didn't want anyone to know where they were. He was seeking uninterrupted time with His disciples in order to teach them. Then the phrase **& was telling them** points out He's speaking to them about this over & over again. He isn't saying this once or twice, but it's an ongoing instruction & discussion about this crucial event as they walk along. What's He **teaching & telling** them? That **the Son of Man is to be delivered**. This won't be an accidental death but premeditated murder. **Delivered** means to be handed over. The Son of Man is to be **delivered** into the hands of men. We see this repeated in the coming chapters.

**Mk 10:33 -- Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, & the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests & the scribes; & they will condemn Him to death & will hand Him over to the Gentiles.**

**Mk 15:1 -- Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders & scribes & the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; & binding Jesus, they led Him away & delivered Him to Pilate.**

**Mk 15:15 -- Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, & after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.**

The grammar of **delivered** gives it a sense of certainty & hints at betrayal. It could be referring to the actions of Judas (3:19; 14:18, 21, 42, 44), the actions of the religious leaders turning Jesus over to Pilate (15:1, 10), or to Pilate delivering Jesus to be crucified (15:15).<sup>6</sup> What's clear is that Jesus will be handed over to others who will murder Him. But before you think this is some random tragedy out of God's control know that this same term, **delivered**, is used to describe God Himself delivering up Jesus for our redemption. In human terms, the elders, chief priests, scribes, (Mt 27:1–2; Acts 3:13), Judas (Mt 26:24), & Pilate (Mt 27:26) all were guilty of killing Jesus. But ultimately, **Jesus was delivered over by the predetermined plan & foreknowledge of God** (Acts 2:23). Paul says

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<sup>6</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 407

in Rom 8:32, **He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all.** Jesus is teaching His disciples that by a willful, pre-meditated, evil act men will betray Him but only as the will of God permits it in order to fulfill God's divine plan. Though men will intentionally & knowingly seek to murder Jesus, it's God's will that Christ die for the sins of His people. God initiated this action before the earth existed. Jesus was going to Jerusalem to fulfill His role as Messiah. Because it was the Father sending Him there, it wasn't an act of betrayal, because from all eternity it had been agreed among the Godhead that the Father would send the Son into the world to bring about His plan of salvation for His people. Jesus came to do the will of the Father, & to do that, He had to suffer at the hands of sinful people.<sup>7</sup> Look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of vs 31 & note the double reference to His murder. **They will kill Him; & when He has been killed...** This points to the reality of Jesus being put to death violently. Then vs 31 concludes with this: **He will rise 3 days later.** Jesus won't just die physically, He'll also be physically resurrected. His death isn't the end, it's the beginning. His disciples still don't get it & worse, they're afraid to ask. **32**

**Not understand** means it escaped them. Their spiritual dullness has been a consistent theme since Jesus began to teach in parables.<sup>8</sup> Two things about His statement would have been incomprehensible to the disciples. 1<sup>st</sup>, the Messiah would suffer & die. 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Messiah would rise from the dead. Resurrection was viewed in Judaism as occurring at the end of time, when all the dead would be raised & judged by God (Dan 12:2-3). The resurrection of an individual within history was outside of their comprehension.<sup>9</sup> They continue to picture a deliverer from Rome & not a Deliverer from sin. A crucified Messiah was incomprehensible & unacceptable to them. For that reason Jesus exhorted them, **Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men** (Lk 9:44). They needed to listen carefully & understand what He was saying to them about His death.<sup>10</sup> They refused to see something other than a ruling Messiah. They couldn't see how a suffering Messiah was a good thing. Listen to how Luke describes their reaction, **they did not understand this statement, & it was concealed from them so that they would**

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<sup>7</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 229

<sup>8</sup> See 4:13, 40; 6:52; 7:18; 8:17-18, 21; 8:32; 9:5-6, 19

<sup>9</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, pp 407-408

<sup>10</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 9-16*, p 34

not perceive it; & they were afraid to ask Him about this statement (Lk 9:45). Mt 17:23 adds, **they were deeply grieved**. They didn't get it & God concealed it from them since they weren't ready & prepared yet for the full implications. Jesus compassionately chose not to reveal information to them that He knew would devastate their faith. They didn't yet understand what God was going to accomplish through Christ's death & resurrection. There's a growing sadness about what might lie ahead for Jesus & for all of them. That's part of the reason why vs 32 ends with, **they were afraid to ask Him**. Why? The simplest solution is that the disciples are intimidated & afraid to ask because Jesus has been accusing them of spiritual dullness (4:13; 7:18; 8:18, 21). How could they now admit that they still don't understand?<sup>11</sup> Plus, after Peter challenged Jesus' words about His death, Jesus reacted harshly toward Peter with, **Get behind Me, Satan** (Mk 8:33). So which one of them is going to ask Jesus about His coming death now? None of them.

All too often we're just like them. We're flawed, corrupted, messed up, distorted, defiant, & rebellious in our sin. We violate God's law, distort God's character, & resist God's perfect plan. We know we deserve judgment but we all want to avoid it. But it's impossible for us to cleanse ourselves from our sins. It's impossible for us to get right with God by our choices. God has to save us so He was born a man, lived a perfect life, & died on the cross for our sins, taking our punishment, satisfying God's justice & providing a way for us to be forgiven. That's what makes Jesus the model of humility. Perfect God left heaven to live as a man for 33 years, then die for the sins of His children. It wasn't just any death but the death of a criminal on the torture of the cross. Rom 5:6 & 8 says, **For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.... God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us**. Humility is dying to self & serving others. It's giving yourself away & seeking what's best for others. True humility is perfect, almighty God, solving our sin problem. Jesus going to the cross is the example of true greatness. Laying down one's life for another is the ultimate expression of humility (Jn 15:13). The path to greatness has to do with denying yourself but the disciples struggled with this. Even the night before Jesus was crucified, in the Upper Room, the 12 were

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<sup>11</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 408

again arguing over who is the greatest. What did Jesus do? He removed His outer garment, took a basin of water & began to wash the disciples' feet. The Incarnate God, who is just hours away from dying for their sins, washed the feet of His arrogant disciples. He told them, **If I then, the Lord & the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.... For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you** (Jn 13:14-15). But for now, the meaning of humility, serving others, & the Lord's coming suffering & sacrifice completely escaped His disciples.

## **2. Instruction on Humility (33-37) 33-34**

Capernaum was Jesus' base of operations during his Galilean ministry (1:21; 2:1), so it isn't surprising He returns here. The home isn't identified, but it could be Peter's (1:29). The spiritual ignorance noted in vs 32 is illustrated through the disciples' actions as they argue about who is the greatest. As the 1<sup>st</sup> passion prediction was followed by Peter's rebuke of Jesus (8:32), this one is followed by acts of pride. Jesus asks what they were arguing about but clearly knows the answer. He gives them the chance to 'fess up. While this debate about greatness may sound inappropriate & egotistical to our ears, it's less in the honor/shame culture of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, where boasting was considered necessary to confirm one's social status in the community. Jesus' messiahship had come onto center stage since Peter's confession in 8:29, & now the disciples are vying for the best positions in His kingdom.<sup>12</sup> How subtle & sick pride is. How bad is it? Just after Jesus describes His coming death on the cross His men start arguing about their coming crowns. Immediately after the Lord announces His passion, they're arguing about their privileges. Pride, being self-focused, is indifferent to others. Pride plagued the Corinthian church, causing Paul to ask, **since there is jealousy & strife among you, are you not fleshly, & are you not walking like mere men?** (1 Cor 3:3). While on the road, they're having a lively discussion. This is a hot topic between them. They're fighting over position & their place in the coming Kingdom, pushing for a higher rank, & seeking to be 1<sup>st</sup>. They're arguing over which one is the greatest. The disciples still have visions of grandeur & don't dream about becoming servants. They suffer from puffed-up ambition that will never be

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<sup>12</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 408

ready to take up a cross & follow a suffering servant Messiah.<sup>13</sup> The disciples want to be 1<sup>st</sup> in Christ's kingdom. They wanted the chief seats, like the scribes. They're preoccupied with rank & honor. 3 of them just returned from the Transfiguration. Peter, James, & John are probably leading the way in claiming 1<sup>st</sup> place in Christ's kingdom. Peter, the one Jesus called the Rock, says, *It's got to be me. No, James & John say, we're the Sons of Thunder, it's us!* The other 9 all have had their moments & they all want to be 1<sup>st</sup>. It could even be that all this talk of Jesus' coming death has given rise to the thought of who'll be His successor? Who is going to take over? Jesus sees into their hearts & gives them an opportunity to confess but they're too ashamed to reply. Their silence betrays their guilt. No one uttered a word. It was an embarrassing, shameful silence. It was now time for some teaching. If they were going to continue to be His disciples & succeed in their ministry, they'd have to learn this lesson & learn it well. Jesus wants them to see that greatness isn't found in being 1<sup>st</sup>, but in living last. Humility doesn't focus on self but on serving others. True greatness is thinking more about the Great One & about others than thinking about yourself. Remember how Paul thought of himself? He said, & this is in chronological order, **I am the least of the apostles** (c. AD 59; 1 Cor 15:9). 4 years later, **I am the very least of all the saints** (c. AD 63; Eph 3:8). One year later it was, **I am the foremost of sinners** (c. AD 64; 1 Tim 1:15). As the years pass, Paul thinks less & lower of himself & increasingly thought more & higher of Jesus & others. Like John the Baptist Paul knew that Jesus **must increase, but I must decrease** (Jn 3:30). How do we grow in humility? Thankfully, Jesus gives us specific answers. Do you want to be great in God's eyes? Are you wanting to please Jesus? How can you make the biggest impact for Christ on your campus? In your workplace? In your neighborhood? In your church? Grow in humility. How? By obeying what Jesus says. **35**

Jesus makes 2 powerful applications, 2 steps to developing humility. In fact, without these you can't become humble.

**A. Be First in Service To Others** Jesus is at a house in Capernaum. He asks the disciples what they're arguing about. He then sits down. When rabbis officially taught, they'd sit down & that's what Jesus

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<sup>13</sup> David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 367

does. School is now in session. Who is the greatest person in God's eyes? **If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all & servant of all** (35). Like many in our day, the disciples viewed pride as normal, desirable, & legitimate. After all, pride characterized the most revered men in Israel, the religious leaders, who **do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries & lengthen the tassels of their garments. They love the place of honor at banquets & the chief seats in the synagogues, & respectful greetings in the market places, & being called Rabbi by men** (Mt 23:5-7). Jesus says that's wrong. To be greatest in God's kingdom is to **be last of all & servant of all**. No matter who you are, as a Christian, we're all called to radical servanthood. This is the way to greatness in God's eyes. We're to serve 1<sup>st</sup> & live last in a *me 1<sup>st</sup>* world. Jesus tells His men what matters to Him is for them not to pursue being the top dog, but to strive to be last & serve all. Do you want to please Jesus? Jesus says anyone can pursue being great in His eyes. Being 1<sup>st</sup> isn't evil, as long as it's being 1<sup>st</sup> the way He designed. Go ahead & desire to be great in God's eyes, just do it His way. What way is that? There are 2 ways. **Be last of all & servant of all. Shall be last** means *be last by your own deliberate choice*. It's choosing to let others go 1<sup>st</sup>. It's esteeming others more than yourself. **Servant of all** is a heart seeking to demonstrate voluntary service to others. True humility isn't self-deprecation or humiliation but an attitude of unselfishness & self-forgetfulness which seeks the welfare of others. Jesus says being last & service is to be **to all**. This isn't just for your friends, your family, or your favorite people, but to everyone, friends & strangers, popular & lowly. Service isn't only the way to developing humility but the very essence of greatness in Christ's kingdom. Do you serve others? You're commanded to. Your Savior calls you to serve & the only way you can kill pride & develop humility is to serve. In Gal 5:13 Paul tells us, **For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another**. Serve others in your church. Peter puts it this way:

**As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory & dominion forever & ever. Amen (1 Pt 4:10-11).**

True greatness in God's Kingdom is cultivated through a heart of service. We're to be like Jesus, who came to serve. Jesus said, **For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, & to give His life a ransom for many** (Mk 10:45). Are you here this morning to be served or to serve? To grow in humility, seek to be last, & serve others. The 2<sup>nd</sup> key to developing humility is to...

**B. Care for the Weakest** Look at what Jesus says in **36-37**.

This is a tender moment. As Jesus sits there teaching them, He picks up a child, turns the child around so the child is facing the disciples, & cradles the child in His arms. It's possible that this child is one of Peter's kids. Don't think that Jesus is saying here that we need to be humble like a child. That's not what He's saying here. Look carefully at vs 37. **Whoever receives one child like this in My name, receives Me.** Is Jesus referring to welcoming actual children, lowly members of society, or believers? It's important because Jesus says that receiving one of these is the same as receiving Jesus. Since those who represent Jesus are His followers, the child must represent a follower of Jesus. Jesus' point is that true servant leadership means welcoming those of His followers who are deemed irrelevant & unworthy of such recognition. In our culture we tend to view children as innocent, vulnerable, gentle, & even pure. But in 1<sup>st</sup>-century culture they were viewed as insignificant & having no social status. Children weren't fawned over in those cultures but they were considered weak, lowly, & unimportant. A child hasn't yet accomplished or achieved anything; they have no power or honor but are weak, dependent, & ignored. Welcoming a little child means breaking social norms, lowering oneself to accept another of lower status, & thereby risking one's own position of power & prestige. Jesus is saying we must be accepting, serving, & caring for the lowliest on the social ladder. We're to be a servant of all. The point of this living illustration of a child to the disciples is seen in that in the Aramaic language *child* & *servant* were the same word. Jesus was saying that the disciples must receive His children (other servants & disciples) with the open arms & love with which He was holding that child. There was to be no thought of position, but simple, open-armed affection. Jesus said that when they did this in His name, they welcomed not only Jesus, but the One who sent Him, God the Father. Again, the disciples aren't told here to be like children but to be like Jesus who received them. It's Jesus, not

the child, who portrays what a servant is all about. The issue isn't the imitation of the children, but how you accept & care for the weakest & neediest around you. When you embrace the weakest & lowliest Christian, it's not because they're great by worldly standards, but because they belong to Jesus. Those who serve the weakest & least significant of Jesus' followers are serving Jesus & in turn the One who sent Him. The profound reality is that how we treat fellow believers is how we treat Christ. If one wants to be great, one should serve those who are regarded as insignificant, as Jesus Himself has done. Jesus requires His disciples to humbly serve the least. When you care for & embrace the lowly, you're not only humble but you're also welcomed by God the Father. As you serve the weak & needy believers you're giving evidence that you're truly a follower of Christ. You are showing you belong to God. We're to receive all of God's people as we do children, with no thought of their accomplishments, influence, fame, or gifts, but simply because they are His children. This rules out seeking the powerful or influential for what they can do for us. This is a warning about neglecting the simple, the humble, & the ordinary.<sup>14</sup> James extended this same warning when he said,

**My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with *an attitude of personal favoritism*. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring & dressed in fine clothes, & there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, & you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, & say, "You sit here in a good place," & you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, & become judges with evil motives? (Jas 2:1-4).**

**3. Application** We are called to live lives of giving instead of taking & to think 1<sup>st</sup> about the needs of others.

**A. The Danger of Pride** The disciples' argument about who was the greatest must be understood in the context of the honor/shame culture of the ancient Near East, where status within the community was among the highest of values & where servants & slaves had low status & few rights. In this context the disciples arrogantly argue over which of them deserves the greatest honor in Jesus' coming kingdom. We all have subtle ways of asserting ourselves & seeking to increase our status in the eyes of others. We love the praise of others. But Jesus teaches it isn't

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<sup>14</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark*, p 32

about being 1<sup>st</sup>, but about being last & the servant of all. The role of the slave or servant in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was to meet the needs of the master, to do whatever was necessary to help that person succeed. It's the same in the church. It's not about us but about enabling others to be all that God has called them to be. Every Christian is 1<sup>st</sup> & foremost a discipler, training others to live as servants & givers in a world of takers (2 Tim 2:2).<sup>15</sup>

**B. Are You Growing in Humility?** Jesus tells us in order to develop humility, we must regularly & faithfully serve your fellow Christians, even the lowliest. True greatness means caring about people, especially the lowly. This isn't optional for us, but commanded of us. There's a natural human tendency to give reverence to those of position, power, & influence because they, in turn, can advance our social status & position. But every genuine believer serves even the lowliest because that is who a Christian is. If you know Jesus, you'll want to be like Him who came to serve. Are you a servant, not with an occasional act of service, but as a way of life? The greatest in God's eyes are those who humble serve all others. Those developing humility are those who care for the weakest. Jesus changes our hearts so we want to care for & serve others. Are you growing in humility? To do so...

**C. You Must Know Christ** Becoming a Christian isn't accepting Jesus in your heart for fire insurance & then continue living for yourself. To become a Christian, you come to the end of yourself & hate your sick, proud, & selfish sin. You surrender your life to Him, believing He took the punishment for your sins on the cross & lives to give you eternal life. You have to humble yourself to believe this. If you've never come to that place, but in your heart you're sick of your pride, & see it as God does, then humble yourself & turn to Jesus alone to be saved & then serve others as Jesus commands.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, pp 415–416