

Sermon outline and notes:

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Mark 10:35-45 “Greatness in God’s Sight”

Intro. At this point in my series of messages in the Gospel of Mark, we find Jesus drawing near to Jerusalem. The number of followers of Christ by this time was smaller than in the earlier days. And the few who were following Christ to Jerusalem were amazed and fearful (v.32). There was a sense of foreboding concerning what was about to take place. They were going up for the Passover feast, where hundreds of thousands of Jewish families would offer up a lamb as a sacrifice. Yet Jesus knew that soon, He was going to offer *Himself* as a sacrificial lamb, to die on a Roman cross. So He warns His disciples in vv.33-34 that in Jerusalem He would be condemned to death by the ruling council of Israel, and He would be severely mistreated, and then delivered to the Romans to be executed by the terrible death of crucifixion.

Somehow, this warning did not sink into the minds of the disciples. It is clear from what follows that they were focusing on a crown, not a cross. You see, most of the close followers of Jesus firmly believed that He was the Messiah who was to save and rule Israel in a glorious kingdom. And they believed that they would rule and reign with Him. But simply reigning with Christ was not enough. James and John wanted to know who would reign *closest* to Christ. Who would be the greatest in the kingdom? So they wanted to go ahead and settle the issue, as we shall see.

Do you aspire to greatness, or a great heavenly reward? Would you like to be on top? It is characteristic of human nature to seek position, authority, power, and praise. We want to be served and tell others what to do. Most all of us want to be king of our own little kingdom, whether it is a family, or circle of friends, or business, or even our church. Well, Jesus has much to say about that attitude, and I want to share His teaching with you.

Now my first appeal to our hearts is this:

I. SHUN A SELF-CENTERED AMBITION FOR GREATNESS

In v.35 we see that James & John approached Jesus. They were interested in obtaining a special favor from Jesus.

A. A Preliminary Request – In the last of v.35 James & John¹ asked, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.” This kind of request is generally made when children are not too sure that they have a right to receive what they are about to ask. They want you to commit before hearing their request.

In v.36 Jesus replied, “What do you want Me to do for you?” Notice that Jesus refuses to commit Himself. He’s too smart for that! Making blind promises is wrong. Think of Herod’s promise to his step-daughter Salome! (Mark 6:22).

There is a lesson here about prayer. Prayer is not a blank check from God. He will answer our prayers favorably if they are according to His will (1 Jn. 5:14-15). God does not answer selfish

¹ The gospel of Matthew tells us that the mother of James and John was involved in this request. The boys must have put their mom up to this, & she was more than willing to ask this favor for her sons. What mom does not want her children to succeed in school, in extracurricular activities, and in life?

prayers. James 4:3 says, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.” God wants to give us what is best for us, not merely what we want. He denies some of our requests for our good.

After Jesus refused to commit to grant *any* request, we see next in our story:

B. A Bold Request – In v. 37 they said to Him, “Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.” They wanted to have the two highest positions of authority next to Jesus!

Now why would they even think of such a request? They were right in believing that Jesus is King of kings and will one day reign on earth, seated on the throne of His glory. Look back at the last words of chapter 8, v.38. There Jesus talks about coming “in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” They believed that the establishment of the kingdom was very close at hand; in fact, they thought it could appear immediately (Lk. 19:11). No doubt they believed the promise Jesus had given, that in the future kingdom, the disciples would sit on 12 thrones with the Lord Jesus (Mt. 19:28). Yet who would sit closest to Him? Well, James & John thought they had a good shot at getting those two seats. After all, in chapter 9 they were only 2 of 3 disciples that got a vision of Jesus in His glory on the mount of transfiguration.² That’s because they were in the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. On top of that, they were probably related to Him through their mother. So they could just see themselves reigning right next to Jesus in the kingdom to come!

The desire for greatness or leadership is not wrong in itself. Paul said in 1 Timothy 3:1, “If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.” Sometimes we may sincerely want a high position for a noble purpose. High position gives you greater influence, and you may be able to do more good with greater influence. Perhaps they just wanted to be as near as possible to Jesus. And if you desire to be chief among men and women, I am sure that you can give some good reasons for your ambition. But notice with me:

C. What Was Wrong with the Request – I see at least 3 things wrong with their request:

1. It Demonstrated Selfish Ambition – It is clear to me that sinful ambition was playing a role here. They desired that the two most honorable places should be assigned, not to Peter and Andrew, or to Philip and Bartholomew, but to themselves! Christ was only thinking of others as He was on His way to the Cross. But they had their thoughts centered on self-advancement in the kingdom. They still dreamed of temporal crowns and earthly rewards.

We must guard our hearts against *selfish* ambition. Paul said in Php. 2:3, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.”

2. Selfish Ambition Leads to Conflict - In v.41 we read, “And when the ten heard it, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John.” The word translated “to be greatly displeased” (*aganakteo*) is better translated with the stronger word, “to be indignant.” They could not believe the audacity of James & John. They were upset that James & John wanted to be on top! The bitter feeling threatened what little harmony the apostolic band had. Selfish ambition will always destroy unity among believers. In fact, this conflict over who would be the greatest continued on the night of the Last Supper (Lk. 22:24).

Now James & John were wrong in their ambitious request. But the other disciples were wrong in their reaction. Jesus had to correct the whole group. The 10 remind me of Joseph’s

² Peter, James, and John were part of the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. Furthermore, their mother seems to have been a sister or cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus (cf. Mt. 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25).

brothers who were jealous toward him. Joseph had dreams of being on top, of even ruling over his brothers, and they became jealous to the point of wanting to kill their own brother! Watch out for jealousy! Furthermore, the other 10 probably would not have been upset had it not been for the probable fact that *they* wanted these highest positions for themselves. They were unhappy because they had not thought of asking first! I can imagine Peter thinking, “Remember me, I’m the one who walked on water! I was the one that spoke up and confessed that Jesus is the Messiah. I have been the leader of this group all along. I should be the one who reigns next to Jesus!”

The ambition of clergymen is a great scandal in the church, and frequently causes rivalries, enmities, divisions, and schisms.

3. Selfish Ambition Is Worldly - Jesus said in the last of v.42, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.” Do you think that most of our political leaders seek office for the benefit of the people they represent, or for their own benefit? Back in the day when we had a truly Christian nation, we had quite a few statesmen who held office to serve God, and serve the people. But as our nation has turned from Christ, we have more and more political leaders who seek office for self-centered reasons: to exercise power, to gain fame, to have servants, and to obtain financial benefits. They will sell a vote to ride in Air Force One with the President!

So Jesus points out here that their attitudes demonstrated the way of worldly people. They wanted to rule and be on top like their Gentile rulers. It was the pomp, privilege, power, and position in the Gentile world which was so greatly esteemed. Like many people today, the disciples were making the mistake of following the wrong examples. Instead of modeling themselves after Jesus, they were admiring the glory and authority of the Roman rulers.

The people of God get into trouble when we try to model ourselves after the world. We are not to follow this old sinful world; we are to follow Jesus!

So we are to shun selfish ambition for worldly position, power, & fame. Instead, we should:

II. FOLLOW THE PATH OF TRUE GREATNESS

Does God offer the reward of greatness? Will some have higher positions of authority (Luke 19:13-25) in the kingdom of Jesus than others? Will someone be seated next to Jesus in the coming kingdom? Yes indeed. You can be one of the great leaders in the kingdom of Jesus! Jesus did not rebuke a desire for greatness. Instead, He explained the true path to greatness. You may be surprised by the prescription of greatness that Jesus gives here in this text, for it is a complete reversal of popular opinion. Here is what you need to understand:

A. Greatness Requires a Sacrificial Commitment to Christ – Jesus here reminds them that a request for glory is a request for suffering. Mere desire for greatness is not enough. Jesus said in v.38, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” To “drink the cup” means to fully undergo this or that experience. Drinking the cup points to Christ’s active obedience to suffer & die for others. Later in the Garden of Gethsemane He would refer to his death again as “the cup” (14:36). The word “to be baptized” does not refer to water baptism, but it points to suffering, and it is probably used here in the figurative sense of “to be overwhelmed” by agony (cf. Lk. 12:50). Jesus knew He was to be plunged into the flood of horrible distress. Would they be willing to experience the agony of suffering also? Are they willing to die to self? At this point it seems they were more interested in promoting self!

Notice their response. They said in v.39, “We are able.” They sure were confident in themselves! Then Jesus said to them in the last of v.39, “You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized.” Jesus affirms that they would first have to suffer, rather than be exalted. In fact, James was the first apostle to be martyred (Acts 12:2) and John was banished to the island of Patmos in his old age and suffered much, including hunger, cold, & isolation (Rev. 1:9).

It is easy to say we will endure anything for Christ, and yet most of us complain over the most minor problems. If you seek ease and comfort, you will never be great in God’s Kingdom. If you would be near Him then, you must be near Him now. You must be willing to obey Christ, and follow Him, even if He leads you down the path of suffering. If we would share His throne, we must bear His cross. Many people want glory, but they are not willing to suffer and labor intensely. The fact is that the path to suffering is a path to glory.

A certain man described a dream he had. I saw in a dream that I was in the Celestial City—though when and how I got there I could not tell. I was one of a great multitude which no man could number, from all countries and peoples and times and ages. Somehow I found that the saint who stood next to me had been in Heaven more than 1,900 years. “Who are you?” I said to him. “I,” said he, “was a Roman Christian; I lived in the days of the Apostle Paul. I was one of those who died in Nero’s persecutions. I was covered with pitch and fastened to a stake and set on fire to light up Nero’s gardens.” “How awful!” I exclaimed. “No,” he said, “I was glad to do something for Jesus. He died on the cross for me.”

The man on the other side then spoke: “I have been in Heaven only a few hundred years. I came from an island in the South Seas—Erromanga. John Williams, a missionary, came and told me about Jesus, and I too learned to love Him. My fellow-countrymen killed the missionary, and they caught and bound me. I was beaten until I fainted and they thought I was dead, but I revived. Then next day they knocked me on the head, cooked and ate me.” “How terrible!” I said. “No,” he answered, “I was glad to die as a Christian. You see the missionaries had told me that Jesus was scourged and crowned with thorns for me.”

Then they both turned to me and said, “What did you suffer for Him? Or what did you sell & give to send men like John Williams to tell the heathen about Jesus?” And I was speechless. And while they both were looking at me with sorrowful eyes, I awoke, and it was only a dream! But I lay on my soft bed awake for hours, thinking of how little I had really experienced the words of Jesus, “You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized.”³

Are you willing to suffer rejection & even ridicule by relatives, friends, classmates, or co-workers? To receive the reward of greatness, you must be willing to pay the price of suffering. Since Jesus was willing to suffer, and even die for us, we should be willing to suffer for Him!

B. Greatness Requires Personal Service to Others – Notice what this involves:

1. We Must Reject the World’s Way – Again, Jesus said in v.42, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.” Those who are rulers in this world exercise authority for their personal benefit. In this world greatness is determined by how many people you rule over. But Jesus clearly states in v.43, “Yet it shall not be so among you....” In the church there are to be no rulers, but only servant-leaders. Yet by the Middle Ages the Church turned against this clear teaching of Jesus, and established ecclesiastical hierarchies and rulers. Their top rulers even had thrones & scepters, & the

³ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*: #4310 (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979).

common people had to bow & kiss their hand or feet. However, our Baptist forefathers did understand this principle. So we do not have a hierarchy of priests, bishops, Cardinals, and a Pope. The Convention in Nashville or Richmond has no authority over this local church, this pastor, or any member of this church. And no one person or small group in the church is given authority to dictate or rule with a heavy hand. And every time you have a power struggle in a local church, you violate what Christ is saying here. We should submit to one another, and serve one another; not rule over each other.

So what are we to do?

2. We Must Follow Jesus' Way - Jesus said in vv.43-44, "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all." Greatness consists in self-giving, in the outpouring of the self in service to others, for the glory of God. God's pattern in Scripture is that a person must first be a servant before God promotes him or her to be a ruler.

Joseph was a servant in Egypt before he became a ruler in Egypt by the Providence of God. Moses forsook the worldly power of Egypt & served his father-in-law in the backside of a desert before He became the leader of God's people. Joshua served Moses before he became the leader of Israel. David humbly served his father as a shepherd before God raised him up as the shepherd of His people. Unless we know how to obey orders, we do not have the right to give orders. What is it that makes a godly mother the queen of her children? Simply that all her life she has been their servant, and never thought about herself, but always about them.

This is perhaps the most important basis of allocating spiritual leadership in the church. If you are a S.S. teacher you are in that position to serve your class, to study hard and teach them the Word of God, and to minister to them. If you are a deacon, your role is not to rule the church, but to serve the church. The same is true of me as a pastor. Are you serving your family, your church, and your fellow man?

Jesus did not just teach us about being a servant; He showed us by His own example. In v.45 Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." This is the key verse in the gospel of Mark. Whenever the Bible wishes to give the supreme example, it points to Jesus. Notice that Jesus came to us. He came from where? We know from other Scriptures that He came from heaven, with all of the glory and privileges He enjoyed. He came from a realm where angels served Him. And when He came to earth, He "did not come to be served, but to serve...." He lived day after day in service to others, healing the sick, doing other good works, and teaching the Word of God to hungry souls.

His greatest act of service on our behalf was dying for us. Jesus went on to say that He had come "to give His life a ransom for many." This passage is a clear proof of Christ's substitutionary atonement. He was not just a martyr. When He suffered, He suffered in our place. When He died, He died for us. A ransom (*lutron*) was originally the price paid for the release of a slave. Sin makes slaves of us. Sin condemns us. But Jesus redeemed us from our slavery to sin, & He set us free by the payment of His own blood. It cost Him a very high price. It was the public payment of the debts of sinful people to a holy God.

Don't worry if you are one of the "many" that Christ died for. 1 Tim. 2:5-6 says, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all...." He died for all, but since not all will be saved, He effectively died for "many." Anyone here today can be saved. The cross, with its burden of sacrifice for the world's sin, is the only power which will supply us with a sufficient motive for the loftiness of Christlike service.

Don't you want to be great in the Kingdom of God? Don't you want a great reward? Well instead of reckoning greatness by how many servants you have, Christ reckons greatness by how many you serve. Are you a servant? Do you have a servant's heart? Are you too good to serve in the nursery, or cut grass, or wipe tables after a church meal? Do you think you too important to stoop to lowly service for someone else? Jesus says to be great in the kingdom of God, you must be a servant to others. Let us serve to meet the needs of others, to help them bear burdens, or to ease suffering.

Conclusion: Yes, a great reward awaits those who follow the example of Jesus Christ. If you follow Christ, even to the point of suffering, and if you serve others, then you will be great indeed. In Philippians 2, Paul wrote of Jesus becoming a servant, and even dying on the cross. Then he wrote, "Wherefore, God has highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name." Peter wrote, "Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, and in due time, he will lift you up." If you want to be great, then follow the path to greatness that Jesus took, through humble service and sacrifice for others.

Before you can be great in the coming kingdom of God, you must first enter the kingdom by repentance of sin, & faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. He died on the cross to save you from your sins. Make sure you will be among those who will enter the kingdom of God. Jesus said in John 3:3, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Have you been born again? If not, turn to Christ & be saved today!

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2010; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 7 & 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through Online Bible); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Dr. Jerry Vines (sermon tape of 2/12/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

Compares sources of Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 22:24-27.