

Service: the Jesus Way to Greatness

Today's second Scripture is Mark 10:35-45. The context of this saying of Jesus is remarkably disturbing. Jesus had just finished predicting, as he had done on numerous previous occasions, his approaching arrest, condemnation, execution and then his resurrection (vv.32-34). Obviously the disciples had either ignored or misunderstood Jesus' prediction and making a quantum leap in the conversation, James and John made a remarkably inappropriate and insensitive request of Jesus. They asked Jesus to do them a favor by promising them a place of privilege in the kingdom of God. Jesus then answers that service is the way to greatness in his kingdom.

I'll read **Mark 10:35-45**.

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus asking a favor. They assumed, by ignoring or misunderstanding what Jesus had taught them earlier about greatness through humble service, that prestigious positions in the coming kingdom of God were now open to the first applicants. They still, despite what Jesus had been saying about the nature of his kingdom, that they were about to become part of a radically new political kingdom, over which Jesus would reign triumphant over their enemies, including the occupying Roman forces. Thus James and John wanted to be first to ask Jesus to give them a place on his right hand, as second in command of the kingdom, and also on his left, as second in command. Matthew's account tells us that their mother was their intermediary, asking this favor for her sons, James and John. Like any good mother, she wanted what was best for her boys (Matt. 20:20-21); and how proud she would have been to have had her sons in positions of importance!

I'm reminded of the lady who bragged to her friends about her son's important new job that put him over some 500 people. Little did her friends know that her son's job was mowing the grass in a 500-grave cemetery! In the eyes of God the work of a gardener is no lower than that of a company executive and to him a gardener can be a greater person than a head of state. But even as followers of Christ we often love what the fallen world loves, such as "the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what [we have and do]" (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

James and John were evidencing the influence of the surrounding culture upon their thinking and ambition. Greco-Roman culture despised the characteristic of humility, which was not considered a virtue but rather a weakness. Like the culture around them, these brothers were ambitious to have positions of power, prestige and worldly importance (e.g.v.42).

Ironically, as the disciples followed Jesus toward his cross, they seemed to become more infected with this worldly idea of greatness and the ambition for success as the world views it. Earlier they had argued about "who was the greatest." And so, patiently and lovingly, Jesus sat down, called the twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (9:33-35). Obviously they hadn't learned very well, because we find them once again seeking places of prominence, where they would be regarded as great in the eyes of others. After Jesus' reminder of his looming execution and resurrection, still they were obsessed with their personal ambition.

This worldly desire for power, prestige and control over others has been a problem in the kingdom since these first disciples and the first century church. James calls the kind of "wisdom" that is based on pride "devilish" (Jas. 3:15). He notes that those in the church who "harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition" in their hearts are thinking like the fallen world and even the devil himself. And he notes that "where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice" (Jas. 3:13-18). The spiritual health and unity of any church or organization is always ruined by the envy and selfish ambition of those who have failed to understand the heart of Christ, which is one of humble service and of preferring one another in love. The worst kind of power struggles often are those in a church, where people often live out their personal ambitions and desires for power and control, usually when they feel powerless and unsuccessful in their jobs or marriages.

But then the Gospel clearly says that the way to this final and future glory is the way of the cross. Jesus had to suffer and die for us as a prelude to his glory in heaven and his everlasting reign. And we also must take the way of the cross, our cross of weakness, self-denial and obedience to Christ and willingness to suffer for the sake of his name. Thus Jesus told James and John they really did not understand what they were asking (v.38). He then asked if they were able to drink his cup and share his baptism (v.38). The cup represented the cup of the wrath of God against sin. Jesus would have to drink that cup of suffering in his

crucifixion. He would bear the sin of the world. His baptism and theirs would be total immersion in a life of tribulation. Thus Jesus asked if James and John were ready to follow him in a life of suffering and self-denial.

Although they glibly replied that they were able to share his suffering, Jesus replied that indeed they would suffer. James would become, as we see in the Book of Acts, the first of the disciples to be martyred (12:2). John was tortured and exiled to the Isle of Patmos in AD 95. But also Jesus said that the places of special honor would be conferred by the heavenly Father, in the right time and way. Perhaps Jesus was implying that the Father would confer everlasting glory in the consummated kingdom upon those who were focused on the way of the cross, who were faithfully living a cruciform life of self-denial and obedience witness and service to the glory of Christ. Jesus noted that the Father knows who are the faithful ones.

Christ Jesus, the eternal Son of God, entered this sinful, needy world in order to rescue us. Jesus served us by being our ransom sacrifice. He gave his life to purchase our liberation from bondage to sin, death and condemnation. Jesus employed the language of one who purchases the freedom of another who has been condemned to a life of slavery.

Jesus says that he did not come to be served. There is nothing we can do to deserve or to earn this pardon and forgiveness we so desperately need. We can't "serve" him by our merits, efforts, or knowledge. All we can do is admit our need. Even faith, the faith to believe in Jesus and to turn from sin to trust in God, is the free gift of God. "*It is the gift of God* (Eph. 2:8-9). Jesus gave his life to ransom us from our bondage to sin and death and has ransomed us to a life of serving.

We, the ransomed, are indeed no longer our own. We belong to Christ the Ransom-payer. The final verse in our text is a "how-much-more" argument: "*For even the Son of Man* did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Jesus is saying, "If I came to serve you, how much more should you, my ransomed people, live to serve others!" .

Demosthenes, the 3rd Century BC Athenian orator and statesman, noted that the law decreed that one who is ransomed becomes the property of the one who paid the ransom. And Paul the Apostle echoes this thought when he writes that we who are ransomed are no longer our own. We "were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19). Although we are ransomed by grace alone, that grace is not cheap. It wasn't cheap for Jesus and it isn't for us either. It costs us our self-centered lives. Now we belong to Jesus and we are accountable to follow him as Lord and to join him in his service to the world. We're not autonomous servants, "doing our own thing" for God; rather, we're servants of God, serving alongside Jesus and his people.

Just before his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus washed his disciples' feet, giving a dramatic portrait of servant-hood. Traditionally the servant washed his master's feet, but in this instance Jesus reversed the roles and took a towel and a basin of water and washed the feet of his disciples, demonstrating the truth of our text, that indeed he had come to serve us as Savior and supreme Servant. But also, Jesus washed the feet of the disciples to give them and us an example of the attitude we must have toward one another (Jn. 13:1-17).

It doesn't come naturally for us to serve others in humility. As we've noted, it's a very cross-cultural, yea, anti-cultural thing to do. And sometimes it's even at odds with "church thinking." What we need is the attitude of Christ. For this reason Paul upheld Jesus' example of service to the church in Philippi, which was disturbed by divisiveness, selfish ambition and vain conceit, with all looking after their own interests (Phil. 2:3f). As a corrective to this worldly thinking in the church Paul exhorted the Philippian believers to have the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, writing or quoting a hymn, saying that Christ Jesus...*who, though he was in the form of God,*

*did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6-8)*

There's the fallen worldly type of greatness we as believers must eschew. But there's a kingdom greatness to which we may aspire. This idea of kingdom greatness may be what Jesus referred to when he said that "the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he, i.e. John the Baptist (Lk. 7:28). In the kingdom of God we now participate in the "greater" work of the Holy Spirit, doing greater things than were done during Jesus' earthly ministry (Jn. 14:12). We're now part of his great work of the Spirit, with a servant attitude, which is true kingdom greatness in the eyes of God. It's a call to kingdom of God significance rather than to worldly or even churchly success.

I was moved by reading Mother Teresa's *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta."* What was so impressive was her consistent commitment to honor Jesus through of life of radical obedience. She had vowed to never withhold anything Jesus might ask and to always willingly receive whatever he gives, including serving him in the darkest places of the poorest of India's poor. What spoke so powerfully was her focus on loving and obeying Jesus, even when she experienced deep emotional loneliness and spiritual darkness. She identified her experiences with the suffering of Jesus and vicariously experienced Jesus' "thirst for souls." What resulted from the life of

Mother Teresa is a legacy of a life lived in service to others and deep, abiding love for Jesus, regardless of the apparent void of the sense of Jesus' love for her. She was consumed with an obsession that she was living out Jesus' teaching that to minister to the sick, lonely and dying was to minister to Jesus himself (Matt. 25:31-46). What God was doing all along through Teresa's simple life of obedience was shaping in her life a close replication of the character of Jesus' own greatness.

Jesus says we too can achieve greatness through service. He uses the words *diakonos* and *doulos*, servant and slave, to describe our calling. A servant was one called to do ordinary and humble tasks, such as waiting on tables. The truly great Christian is one who does what needs to be done to encourage others and to demonstrate love. The great servant gives with no thought for recognition. A slave is one who belongs to his or her master and is totally answerable to and dependent upon the master. A Christian "slave" is totally dependent on Jesus and has no life except for Christ and his glory.

Jesus came to be our servant, to do what we desperately need but could never provide for ourselves. We can't add to or improve on his ministry to us. All we can do is humbly receive Jesus as our Servant Savior and trust him alone for our salvation ransom. But receiving his salvation gift means we become his servants and slaves. There can be immediate results, such as when you turn off your favorite TV program or sports event and do something, even if it's an onerous task, for your spouse. My guess is you'll get more satisfaction from your spouse's gratitude than from seeing your favorite team score the winning touchdown! Opportunities to serve are all around us.

I want to be a more faithful pastor, serving a faithful people, who serve one another out of love for Jesus, our Servant Example.