

Jesus Came to Serve

Lesson Text: Mark 10:35-45 **Background Scripture:** Mark 10:35-45

Devotional Reading: Philippians 2:3-7

Mark 10:35–45

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” ³⁶ “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. ³⁷ They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

³⁸ “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” ³⁹ “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

LESSON AIMS

1. To show how James and John sought places of honor for themselves and how Jesus showed them that it is better to serve.
2. Compare the quest for esteem evident in James and John with that of our own time.
3. State at least one specific way he or she can serve others in the coming week.

INTRODUCTION

To some degree, all human beings aspire to greatness. It is not that everyone would like to be president of a country—or even president of a club. As children, we may have simply wanted to occupy a certain position on the ball team or be included in a particular social circle. As we grew older, though, our desire for greatness may have been related to our family, occupation, or community standing. Of course, some people are content to be followers and have no desire for notoriety or prominence.

Because of the competitive nature of our world, a desire for greatness may creep into the life of a church. Like the disciples, pastors, church musicians, and lay leaders may vie for prominent positions in the congregation and beyond. Sadly, such desires often result in jealousy, wrangling, and splits. Christians do not part company because they are trying to out serve one another!

Since the Lord's church is not to operate by the principles of the world, it must have different goals. One of those goals is to serve one another, and we cannot be true servants if we are competing with each other for power and popularity.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Since the decisive day in Caesarea Philippi when Peter said to Jesus, “*You are the Christ*” (Mark 8:29; Lesson 10), Jesus spoke to His disciples openly and directly about His pending death (8:31; 9:31). Yet the disciples failed to understand Him (9:32), and Peter even argued with Him (8:32). Clearly it was not easy to understand how the Christ—the promised “anointed one” sent by God—could possibly suffer such a fate.

The disciples, like us, were accustomed to the idea that great people are those who can exercise power over others, who can command others to do their bidding to benefit those who have the power and give the orders. For them, the hated Roman conquerors represented the greatness of power, and the disciples desired that their pagan overlords would be overthrown by an even mightier power. Like us, the disciples struggled to imagine any other way that a person can be great, whether that person is the Christ or anyone else.

By contrast, Jesus challenged them to think very differently. Those who want to save their lives must lose them (Mark 8:35). Those who belong to God’s kingdom must become like little children (9:37; 10:15). It is impossible for those who rely on their own resources to enter God’s kingdom (10:24,25). Being “first,” Jesus told His disciples, consisted of serving others—being “last” in ordinary terms (9:35).

In today’s passage, Jesus brings these ideas together for His disciples. He will tell them again what it means to be great in God’s kingdom. More particularly, He will tell them why in God’s kingdom greatness is defined in a way that seems upside down. (Matthew 20:20–28 is parallel.)

SELFISH REQUEST (Mark 10:35-37)

The Lord and His disciples finally arrived in Judea (Mark 10:1), the province where Jerusalem was located. Heading toward the holy city, the Savior continued to instruct the Twelve concerning those dark days ahead.

Our text begins with a conversation between Jesus and James and John. The latter two are brothers who have followed Jesus since they left their fishing business on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:19, 20). While their personal inquiry sparks the conversation, the issue is not theirs alone. Their request reflects the mind-set of all the disciples.

These two fishermen have left everything behind to follow Jesus. As a result, they have been witnesses to His miracles and students of His teaching. They themselves worked miracles and proclaimed God’s Word when Jesus sent them out to preach with the others (Mark 6:7, 12,13). Certainly they are convinced that Jesus has the power to do anything and that they stand strongly enough in His favor to ask for anything.

Nevertheless, the request sounds audacious. They address Jesus respectfully and submissively as *Master*. But they betray that submissiveness in asking Jesus to do whatever they want. Adding to the irony is the fact that the request to *do for us whatsoever we shall desire* comes right on the heels of another death prediction by Jesus (Mark 10:32–34). These two disciples—and probably the others as well—clearly are clueless regarding what is about to happen in Jerusalem!

1 - Which two disciples made a special request of Jesus (Mark 10:35)?

Jesus’ reply is gracious and open. He says nothing to call out James and John’s presumption. Although He is indeed their master, He is willing to consider their request. He does not exercise His prerogative to refuse them immediately.

2 - What was Jesus’ response to their initial request (v. 36)?

James and John ask for something very significant! Like Peter, they now believe that Jesus is “the Christ,” God’s promised king. They believe that Jesus will be enthroned in the position of supreme power. By asking to sit on either side of Jesus when He is enthroned, James and John desire the most prominent positions (except for Jesus’ own position) in Jesus’ kingdom. They want to share in the power and prestige that they expect will be

His.

The petition of the two brothers certainly revealed the desires of their hearts. Thinking in purely earthly terms, their request indicated that they had missed the significance of some of the greatest teaching of Jesus. No wonder the Twelve were crest-fallen when Jesus was led off to be crucified! Had they only listened to Him, they would have expected these events and seen them as part of God's predestined plan (Mark 9:7). Had we been in their position, however, we probably would not have understood these things any better than they did.

While we may be critical of James and John's request, take a moment to consider your own prayer requests. Do they reflect self-promotion and worldly desires? Are they concerned with personal advancement and comfort, either in the church or in the world? We cannot expect affirmative answers from the Lord when we so frequently pray amiss (James 4:1-3).

3 - What did James and John ask of Jesus next (v. 37)?

SUFFERING REVEALED (Mark 10:38-41)

Jesus' response to James and John offers a correction to their understanding. Just as the disciples have misunderstood Jesus' warnings about His death, so now James and John do not understand the nature of their own request.

When Jesus asks whether the disciples can drink of the same "cup" or receive that same "baptism" (Mark 10:38), He was metaphorically alluding to His approaching suffering and death on a cruel Roman cross. They, of course, were thinking of coming glory.

Not comprehending that Jesus was speaking of His suffering and death (Mark 10:38), James and John quipped, "We can" (v. 39), in answer to Jesus' question "*Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*" (Matt. 20:22).

Christ then assured the two brothers that they would indeed share in His cup and in His baptism. Concerning the Lord's anticipated death, "it would be a devastating experience—and yet James and John said they were able to go through it with Jesus! Little did they realize what they were saying, for in later years they would indeed have their share of the baptism and the cup" (Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Victor).

*We can infer from Jesus' teaching that He uses these terms to speak about His death on the cross. Jesus will use a cup as a symbol of the giving of His blood (Mark 14:23,24) and ask that God take "this cup" from Him (14:36). In Luke 12:50, Jesus also speaks of a baptism that He must undergo, also apparently a reference to His death.

For now, however, James and John still do not really understand. So Jesus continues to speak to them in a way that is memorable but difficult, like a riddle that they can solve only after His resurrection. Jesus speaks obliquely about those who will sit at His right and left. These places have been prepared by God (Mark 10:40). Interestingly, the next time that we read of someone at Jesus' right and left in Mark's Gospel is when Jesus is crucified between two thieves (Mark 15:27)!

4 - How did Jesus respond to their second request to sit at His right and left (vs. 38-40)?

We might read this verse and think that the other disciples are upset because they realize that the request of James and John is inappropriate. But every member of the Twelve probably shares the same perspective, which is not surprising when we consider human nature. The others are upset because they also want prominence and glory when Jesus assumes His throne. In the next verse, Jesus responds to the fundamental misunderstanding that they all share.

5 - Why were the other apostles displeased with the two (v. 41)?

SERVICE REQUIRED (Mark 10:42-45)

Jesus begins His response by reminding the disciples of the behavior of the Gentiles. As He speaks about those who are regarded as rulers, the disciples certainly think of the Roman imperial government. For their entire lifetimes, the disciples have known what it is to be ruled by a foreign empire. They undoubtedly resent the taxes they pay, the violence their people experience, and the indignities they suffer because of Roman rule. The way that the Romans rule is hateful to the disciples and their fellow countrymen.

But it is noteworthy that Jesus does not refer to the Romans directly but to Gentiles, that is, to people who do not belong to the nation of Israel. For the disciples and other Jewish people of the time, this term does not signify just those who belong to another nation, but those who do not know God or belong to God's people. To say *Gentile* is to say *pagan*, one who is ignorant of God.

Thus Jesus is stating flatly that the desire to exercise power over others is characteristic of people who do not know God. It is at the core of experiences that the disciples deeply resent, and with good reason. Yet desire for this kind of power is what the disciples are displaying now. They show that they aspire to be like people who do not know God and who do the very things that they despise.

6 - How did Jesus define the system of authority according to the secular world (v. 42)?

Jesus now draws the contrast. His disciples are not to be like the pagans, whose rule they resent. They will pursue greatness on entirely different terms. Greatness for followers of Jesus will not consist of the exercise of power, but of being a servant to others.

The *King James Version* translates Jesus' key term with the English word *minister*.

While in today's English we associate that term with a preacher in a church, or perhaps with a leader of a government department in a parliamentary system, the term is used here to mean "servant." It translates a word in the original language text that is used for ordinary household servants, people whose duty it is to tend to the needs of others.

Being a servant in Jesus' time is no exalted matter, just as it is not in virtually every human culture. Being a servant means giving of one's time and effort day after day to supply what others require. Such a position has no glamour or status, and it does not pay very well either! It is not a position to which people aspire. But Jesus says that those who are great in His kingdom, the kind of people who sit at his right and left when He is enthroned, are those who will live that very kind of life. If a person wants to be considered "great," or "*first*," he should resolve to be "*slave of all*" (v. 44).

7 - How did Christ define greatness in His kingdom (v. 43)?

To illustrate how the disciples were to act, Christ alluded to His own ministry among them. Was He seeking earthly glory or power? Did He demand that people serve Him? Was He not always concerned about the needs of others? Any desire for worldly power and position did not originate in anything the Twelve had either heard from or seen in their Master.

Christ's greatest act of service was to be accomplished on the cross, when He would give His life as a ransom for many. "Ransom (*lytron*) occurs only here and in Matthew 20:28 in the New Testament. As 'the price of release' it refers to a payment to effect the release of slaves or captives from bondage. It also includes the concept of substitution" (Walvoord and Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Cook).

Jesus focuses His life on this one mission: to give His life for the sake of undeserving people. His purpose is to serve others, at the greatest imaginable cost and despite our unworthiness. Since this is what the almighty Son of Man does, then this is what true greatness consists of. Because God sends His Son to serve at the cost of His life, we too must serve others sacrificially.

8 - How did Christ show what true service is (v. 45)?

CONCLUSION

The Model Servant

Everything around us seems to encourage us to seek power and position. Whether we look at school, jobs, family, friends, or media, all seem to tell us that taking first place, having authority, wealth, and status should be our ambition. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we are happy to listen to that message and follow it.

Everything around us sends us toward power and position except one thing: the cross of Christ. The gospel turns worldly values upside down. We have been served by the greatest one. He served us even to the point of giving His life for us in death. That great truth compels us to reassess our lives and our ambitions. When we serve others as Jesus did, we will discover what life is to be about.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Even those who walk closely with Jesus have to resist the temptation of self- promotion (Mark 10:35-37).
2. Be careful lest your requests to God betray your lack of understanding (vs. 38,39).
3. God's personal plan for each of us reaches even into eternity (Mark 10:40; cf. Matthew 25:34).
4. Displeasure with our brethren too often takes root among us (Mark 10:41; James 4:1-10).
5. God has called Christians to be servant-leaders (Mark 10:42-44; cf. Galatians 5:13).
6. Jesus is the ultimate example of a true servant-leader (Mark 10:45; cf. Philippians. 2:6-8).

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we admit that we love to take first place. Please teach us again that You are the God who entered our world as a servant. Teach us the joy of serving others as You served us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

“You can't live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you” (John Wooden).