

Jesus Defined True Greatness

Lesson Text: Mark 10:32-45 **Devotional Reading:** Matthew 20:20-28.

Background Reading: Mark 10:13-45.

TIME: A.D. 30 **PLACE:** on road to Jerusalem

Mark 10:32-45

³² They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ³³ "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, ³⁴ who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." 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."

TODAY'S AIM

- Facts: to examine Jesus' teaching about true greatness.
- Principle: to explain that true greatness comes in service to others.
- Application: to urge Christians to seek opportunities to serve others.

LESSON BACKGROUND

It was now fairly late in Jesus' ministry. He had been traveling and preaching for three years. He had been so vehemently opposed in Judea that He had withdrawn for a while to Perea, as described in John 10:40-41. Now He again was traveling toward Jerusalem, where He knew He was going to face the cross and death.

It is difficult to understand why so many in Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah. The religious leaders were the worst. Everywhere He went they seemed to appear and cause Him grief. The common people were often confused, for they found in the works and teachings of Jesus comfort for their souls and an answer to the longings they felt regarding their relationship with God. Many of them were torn between believing this Jesus, whose teaching was so real, and the religious leaders, who were supposed to be their spiritual guides.

It was now only about three months prior to His death. Though He had mentioned His death to His disciples on at least two previous occasions (Mark 8:31; 9:31), it was time to give further information and preparation.

Condition of the Twelve (Mark 10:32a)

The apostles' amazement is for their Leader; their fear is for themselves. Jesus recently has been in the Jerusalem area, at Bethany, to raise His friend Lazarus from the dead. That event has stirred more opposition, and a council meeting is called to deal with Jesus. John 11:53 says, "Then from that day forth they [His enemies] took counsel together for to put him to death."

Now Jesus is on His way back to Jerusalem, and His apostles are amazed that He should so soon return there after having encountered such harsh opposition. They undoubtedly must possess a vague sense of foreboding that

some awful event is about to unfold. This feeling probably has been with them for a while now (cf. John 11:8).

It is easy for us to imagine that the apostles are such spiritual giants that they never experience the emotions common to the rest of us, but the Gospel records do not so portray them. Even after seeing so many miracles, they have their doubts as well as their fears, their pride as well as their arrogance. At times they are quarrelsome, at other times vengeful.

Jesus already has taught the apostles concerning fear. When He sent them forth on their evangelistic campaign (two lessons ago), He told them, "*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" (Matthew 10:28). But even though they had been taught not to fear, still they yield to their natural inclination under the circumstances. There is a measure of comfort here for all of us. Though we know and love the Master and desire above all else to obey His words, sometimes, like the Twelve, we fail to do so. The spirit is often willing but the flesh proves to be weak.

1. Why were those who followed Jesus amazed and fearful (Mark 10:32a)?

Fear is a God-given emotion to help protect us. Yet sometimes we must act in spite of our fear. Notice that the disciples continued following Jesus toward Jerusalem despite their fears (v. 32). When we do the same thing, it gives God the opportunity to prove to us that He is worthy of our trust and teaches us where to turn when we are afraid.

In the process we learn to focus on Him instead of our problems or fears. This puts things in perspective. As we encounter obstacles or fears while following Jesus, we quit asking ourselves in desperation, "What am I going to do?" and begin asking, "What is God able to do?"

2. Fear sometimes can keep us from serving God. What are some ways God can teach us and use us despite our fears?

Prediction of Jesus (Mark 10:32b-33)

Jesus predicts His death several times in the Gospels (see Matthew 26:2; Mark 8:31; 9:9, 30-32). When the Twelve learn that He is to be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles, we might think that this will increase their bitterness and multiply their resolve to oppose such an atrocity. But just how much of what Jesus says at this time do they really comprehend? Luke 18:34 states that, "They understood none of these things" and gives as an explanation that the reality of Jesus' pending death was "hid from them."

This fact raises a question: Who is bringing about the hiding? Does God in some miraculous way do it? Isn't it possible that the mind-set of the apostles won't allow themselves to believe it, and in this sense it is hidden from them?

We've all had experiences with things too horrible to believe, things rejected on that basis.

3. Did the disciples truly understand the reality of Jesus' pending death (vs. 32b,33)?

Most of all, Jesus was focusing on His main purpose for coming to this earth. He was born to die for the sins of the world. In a practical sense, Jesus was also trying to prepare His disciples for what was coming. His trials and brutal death would be shocking and unnerving enough for His close friends, but would have been even more difficult with no warning.

Jesus also knew that His followers, then or now, would benefit from repetition. Often we aren't paying attention, or we forget, or our minds are closed by preconceived notions. Jesus' multiple predictions of His pending death were also intended to counter the popular notion of that day that the Messiah would be a military or political hero instead of a spiritual savior.

4. What can we learn from the fact that Jesus predicted His own death so many times?

Mark 14:65 later describes the accuracy of Jesus' predictions. At the conclusion of His trial before Caiaphas, "some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say unto him, Prophecy: and the servants did strike him with the palms of their hands."

Still later, after Pilate has abdicated his responsibility and turned Jesus over to his soldiers, " *They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him.* ¹⁸ *And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!"* ¹⁹ *Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him.*" (Mark 15:17-19). Such abuse of the Messiah had been predicted long before. See Isaiah 53.

As the apostles don't grasp that Jesus is to die, neither do they understand that He will rise again. Like the sad news of His death, the glorious revelation of His resurrection is hidden from them. And it stays hidden until after that event.

Immediately after the resurrection, two angels will remind the women at the tomb of Jesus' prediction, and "they remembered his words" (Luke 24:8). His apostles and other disciples similarly became convinced.

5. How accurate were Jesus' predictions of his suffering and death (v. 34)?

Request of Zebedee's Sons (Mark 10:35-41)

James and John were the second set of brothers called by Jesus to follow Him permanently, right after Peter and Andrew (1:16-20). Their mother was Salome (cf. Matt. 27:56; Mark 16:1). According to Matthew 20:20, Salome accompanied her sons when they approached Jesus on this occasion. Whether she or they initiated this idea is not clear in the text.

According to Mark, the two disciples told Jesus they had a special request for Him. Jesus showed His accessibility by immediately asking what they wanted. It is obvious from this exchange that He and His disciples had a very close and open relationship. After all, they had been together for three years and had shared a multitude of experiences. It was the kind of relationship that allowed subordinates to fearlessly approach their leader and bare their hearts. The exchange also revealed a lack in their understanding.

Notice that the disciples addressed Jesus as "Master." The Greek word is *didaskaios*, which means "instructor." They addressed Him as Teacher (cf. 4:38), evidence that they understood they were to learn from Him in preparation for the future. Their request, however, quickly reveals they still had much to learn!

As noted in answer #3, Luke 18:31-34 indicates that the disciples did not comprehend what Jesus was saying when He announced the details of His death. The request of James and John that they be appointed the privilege of sitting at His right and left sides in the kingdom further indicates this. It shows they were still expecting Jesus to establish His kingdom and rule on earth very soon. The place at the right of a ruler was the most distinguished position of honor, and the place at his left was next.

"The insensitivity of James and John in this verse prefigures the insensitivity of the three disciples in the garden of Gethsemane when they could not stay awake while Jesus was in great agony. It is clear from their words that they did not recognize that Jesus would die; they were expecting Him to inherit the kingdom" (Cooper, Mark, Broadman). Somehow the disciples were missing the impact of what Jesus was saying, in spite of the fact that He had told them of this previously.

6. What did James and John ask Jesus to do for them, and what does this reveal about their thinking (vs. 35-37)?

Yet Jesus did not rebuke His disciples for their lack of understanding. Perhaps He recognized their deep love for Him and knew they were not being as selfish as they sounded. In response He asked them whether they were prepared to suffer with Him the things He would face. He was in essence pointing out that there is a cost to

following Him. It is a great privilege to follow Him, but it also means paying a price. Some things must be sacrificed when a person determines to follow Jesus. The sacrifices ultimately result in joy, but at the time of decision they seem to be difficult to offer.

7. Instead of rebuking James and John, what did Jesus ask them? What did He mean (v. 38)?

Spiritual immaturity can become evident in a number of ways in the church. Sometimes it can take the form of self-centeredness, pettiness, or pride. It shows itself when we insist on having things our way or insist on being the center of attention. At other times it is seen in divisiveness, power struggles, or threatening to withhold offerings until things are done a certain way.

Some more subtle signs of spiritual immaturity can be selfish or inappropriate requests in our prayers, ignoring things that the Bible makes obvious, or twisting certain Bible teachings to say what we want them to say.

8. How can we sometimes show spiritual immaturity like James, John, and the other disciples did in today's lesson?

When Jesus asked whether the disciples could share in His sufferings, He used the figures of drinking from a cup and being baptized. In Jewish understanding the cup was a metaphor either for joy or for divine judgment (cf. Psalm 23:5; 75:7-8). Jesus was about to bear the wrath of God's judgment as payment for the sins of mankind. The figure of baptism was similar in that being under water was used in the Old Testament as a depiction of being overwhelmed by some kind of calamity (cf. Ps. 69:2, 15).

In Luke 12:50 Jesus said, "*But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!*" He said this in anticipation of His crucifixion. God's judgment on sin was going to result in Jesus' death on the cross, where, according to Isaiah 53:4, He would be "*stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.*" Jesus knew the disciples did not yet understand the depth of His approaching suffering. When they said they could share in His suffering, He knew they were responding in ignorance.

But Jesus also knew these men were destined to suffer; so He responded by telling them they would indeed drink of the cup He would drink and be baptized with the baptism He would endure. According to Acts 12:2, James was martyred by Herod the king when he determined to persecute the church. We know that John endured much persecution and was eventually exiled to the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9).

Notice that Jesus does not deny that there will be chief places in the kingdom, only that they shall be given to them for whom they're prepared. Matthew 20:23 further explains that it is the Father who has assigned the positions for which James and John ask.

Matthew 25:31-40 and John 5:22-30 show that Jesus will indeed have a key role in dispensing reward and punishment. But the authority of Jesus is derived from the Father (Matthew 11:27; 28:18; John 14:28), and the Father evidently reserves some functions for Himself.

9. What did Jesus prophesy concerning James and John, and how was His statement fulfilled (vs. 39,40)?

Nothing is stated to show that the ten are equally anxious to have the chief places in the kingdom. But from Jesus' calling of all twelve (v. 42), we may fairly surmise that the ten are of a similar mind as the other two. James and John have shown themselves to be spiritually immature by attempting to grab the chief spots. The other ten now show their own spiritual immaturity as they express displeasure out of jealousy. This is not the first time that these twelve have squabbled among themselves (see Mark 9:33-37).

10. How did the other disciples feel when they learned of the request of James and John (v. 41)?

Jesus, knowing of the disharmony growing among His disciples, called them together for instruction about true

greatness. Jesus began by reminding them that worldly rulers gain their positions by ruthlessly taking advantage of others. The Greek word *katakuriuo* means to "lord over," "control," or "subjugate." It conveys the idea of conquering others without concern for their welfare.

Jesus' point was that in the eyes of worldly people, greatness is equated with advancement and position. How that advancement occurs is not the primary issue; getting ahead is all that really counts. We have witnessed such attitudes among many of the leaders of companies and the rulers of nations.

11. How did Jesus say the world views greatness (v. 42)?

Such attitudes toward growth and advancement are not based on spiritual principles. True greatness is not evidenced by any position we might hold in this life. Rather, it is demonstrated through godly attitudes and actions. Jesus said the greatest evidence of greatness is a willingness to serve rather than to be served. It is a sincere attitude of putting others before self and being concerned about their good rather than one's own good.

Jesus pointedly said to the disciples that the attitudes of the world regarding greatness should not be their attitudes. Spiritual principles are often the exact opposite of the attitudes of the world, and this is one case in point. Worldly-minded people believe that in order to advance, they should take advantage of everyone else, even harming them if necessary, to get ahead. Godliness means allowing others to get ahead and placing our own opportunities for advancement in the hands of God.

Jesus stated that the way for His followers to move ahead and up in life is to serve others. Whether or not that might mean a higher position in a company, an organization, or even a government, the attitude of serving others is, in the eyes of God, evidence of true greatness in the heart of His child. A willingness to voluntarily sacrifice personal interests in order to serve others shows that God is truly being allowed to govern that person's life and heart.

12. How did Jesus explain and illustrate true greatness (vs. 43,44)?

Jesus then used Himself as the primary example of this attitude. We have noted before that many Bible students consider this verse to be the key verse in Mark. Up to this point in his writing, Mark showed Jesus concentrating on serving others in His various ministries. From this verse on, Mark explained how He looked ahead to the cross, where He would give His life as a ransom for sinners.

"He gave the disciples the supreme example of servanthood: Himself. And they had seen Him serve. They had seen Him touch the unclean. They had seen Him heal the multitudes. They had seen Him feed thousands. Before it was over, they would see Him wash the grime from their feet" (Cooper).

Jesus is the Creator of the universe (Eph. 3:9; Heb.1:2), but He left heaven to be born of a young Jewish woman. He had every right to claim Himself as the ultimate example of servanthood. Even though He was rejected and badly mistreated, He continually endeavored to help those around Him, caring about both their physical and their spiritual needs. In the end He died for them-and for all-to pay the price for their sins. He is the ultimate example of true greatness.

13. How was His life an example of true greatness (v. 45)?

CONCLUSION

A true leader is to be a servant of others. If someone wants to be truly great, he must learn to serve. Jesus gave Himself as the supreme example, stating that even He, as the Son of God, came to be a servant of all. We are to follow His example. He came to give His life and die as a payment to redeem the world.

PRAAYER

Dear God, help us to develop servants' hearts. May our goal ever be to minister to You by serving those who have been created in Your image. Make us realize that when we minister to them we minister to Jesus. In His name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Every church has fewer servant-leaders than it really needs.