

September 4, 2011

# *True Greatness is Serving*

Mark 10:35-44

## INTRODUCTION

Have James and John been watching TBN! What kind of a question is this to ask of the God of the universe: “We want you to give us whatever we ask!”

- GREATNESS ACCORDING TO THE WORLD (vv. 35-40)
- GREATNESS ACCORDING TO JESUS (vv. 41-44)

**The Big Idea** is that all that is truly great is always only putting others first.

Don't listen to this passively, thinking that you have this down. Putting others first and yourself last is so much a part of God's reality that it's going to naturally take on more dimensions than you and I are thinking. So the last thing in the world we want to do is to think only about the areas of life that we're already thinking of. Open up your minds and your hearts today and consider more areas in which we're probably exalting ourselves and pushing ahead of, and pushing aside, others.

## DOCTRINE

### I. GREATNESS ACCORDING TO THE WORLD

#### A) The Selective Hearing and Presumptuous Beginnings of Disciples {vv. 35 – 40}

1. *And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (35).* Now if you're wondering how they could possibly ask something like this after everything Jesus had just taught in the last two chapters, you have to realize that anxiety had seized them as they realize that this is it. They're coming up to Jerusalem where something of the coming of the Kingdom was going down. The words **came up to him** (*prosporeuontai*) seem to suggest a cornering of Jesus. By the context we can tell that this was done in earshot of the other disciples and that they're mother was initiating it [cf. Mat. 20:21-22]. *And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” (36).*

Jesus was patient with their selective hearing; but that filter on their hearing was the result of an anxiety that was borne out of natural, earthly ambition. The God-given desire to make something of our life is instantly and constantly perverted into the devilish desire to make a name for ourselves.

2. As to presumptuous beginnings there are two: First, these two come to Jesus with an outrageous request and, secondly, they are ready to take a blood oath to do something that they are absolutely clueless about. So, to the first (the outrageous request): *And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (37)*. Now this request obviously left everyone else out—**Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left**—and interestingly the “left” is sinister in the Latin which reflects the facts that even once these two had raised themselves above the other disciples, they still would have had to fight it out who would get to sit on the right! But to be “seated” around the place of honor is naturally something that can only apply to two people at a time. To ‘sit’ (*kathisomen*) has the sense of elevation and not the common practice of reclining on the floor to eat a meal.

3. Then there is their absurd commitment level: *Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (38)*. Notice that both of these are pictures of judgment. In other words, new Christian, you don’t know what you’re asking for in following Jesus: you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into! The **cup** is a symbol of God’s wrath in the Old Testament. It is always filled with wine, the crimson color of blood. **Baptism** is a symbol of death and burial (cleansing as well, but that’s not its function here). But even with all their misunderstanding in the past, *they said to him, "We are able" (39a)*. Jesus had already guaranteed the Christian two kinds of “crosses,” one being Christ’s atoning work in which every Christian had to be included, the other being our own individual crosses that prove out, through suffering, our radical break from this world. The extreme version of this individual cross is martyrdom, which both James and John would experience. So He responds: *The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized (39b)*. The point is not to figure out what all Jesus has in mind here because the disciples could hardly understand it themselves. It is just to get the point that their outlook on greatness was still worldly. In other words, they had...

B) The Desire for Glory Without Reference to God {vv. 35 – 40}

1. Glory-seeking is not the problem here. Greatness is not the problem. Paul tells us that “to those who...seek for glory, he will give eternal life” [Rom. 2:7]. The trouble with James and John was not that they were shooting too high. In their initial question they ask for *whatever we ask of you* (35). How glorious and great is “whatever?” What exactly is ‘whatever’? Someone once said that if you aim at nothing, you’ll hit it every time. No, James and John, in making much of themselves, were shooting far, far too low! They knew they were with the King and that He was ready to ascend to his throne in his city; but that’s all they cared about. And so what do they do after they make the seating arrangements? They baptized it in spiritual language: **in your glory**. We deceive ourselves when we distinguish ourselves, that it is all for the glory of God.

2. In the humble human form of Jesus, He lets them know what He cannot do. He says, in effect, ‘I can guarantee you that **my cross** will free you forever and that **your cross** will hurt you now,’ “*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*” (40). The exalted Christ prepares a place for us, from before the foundations of the world—and there’s even verses that talk about a special place for the disciples, “ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel” [Mat. 19:28, Lk. 22:30]—but the humiliated Christ, during the Incarnation, sets a pattern for the humble Christian to not think of the kingdom of God as the kind of thing where one of us has a special place above another one of us. That’s not the way of this kingdom.

*I don't know how else to say this but that Mark 10:42-45 is one of the most revolutionary ideas ever spoken: we either don't understand what Jesus is saying or else we find it repulsive. But I personally want to hang my hat on this truth and see to it that the rest of my life is defined by it.*

## II. GREATNESS ACCORDING TO JESUS

### A) The Old Order of ‘Lording it Over’ Others

1. *And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John* (41). Now the fact that this bothered them so much says that their outlook was no different than James and John’s. Now why is there such contention and envy and indignation the world? Another James would give us the answer: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel” [4:1-2]. In other words, in the old creation, everything is cursed and we are cut off from God. Everything we seek is finite and so competition and profit motive and glory-seeking takes on an inherently corrupting

dimension. Everything you and I are aiming at and calling great is limited supply and withering away on the shelves; and so we have no other categories but to claw and scrap for it, so that your benefit is my loss. Greatness down here is a stingy thing; and if I'm going to grasp hold of it and make my life count, I don't have the time or energy to see *you* as equally worth it.

2. *And Jesus called them to him and said to them (42a)*—If Jesus is going to teach them how the new order that is called “the kingdom” differs from the old, then one thing He wants to do is to teach by contrast. The first thing He says about the world's way is this “*You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them (42b)*.” We need to know two things here if we are going to ‘know’ what Jesus is talking about. First of all, who are these **rulers of the Gentiles**, and second, what exactly does it mean to **lord it over** someone else? The easiest piece of the puzzle is the meaning of Gentiles (*ethne*), because it just means “non-Jews,” and since Jesus is talking about the ‘forward-looking kingdom’ here, it means more specifically the “non-people-of-God,” or the people of the old world. The tricky part is the usage of the word “rulers.” On the surface it means the literal government “rulers” because this is exactly what the disciples are applying to be in the kingdom. But the application of Jesus' kingdom ethic goes way beyond how government officials relate to each other, and applies to how *any* authority figure or leader relates to those in our sphere of influence. So “rulers of the Gentiles” in this context means those who lead in all of the orders of the old creation—the state, the family, education or the field of labor.

3. In any of those contexts, the way of the world is *driven by driving people* like beasts, like inanimate pawns on my chessboard. Lording it over others, in other words, always flows forth from having contempt for others. The natural view of the old man toward others is contempt and abuse. Jesus adds the words, *and their great ones exercise authority over them (42c)*. Now it is true that the ancient Hebrew would emphasize things by repetition, but that can be misunderstood. These parallel words are not just a repeating mantra: there is more information here. **Authority** (*exousia*) is the same word used for a ruling power and so often these two English words will share the same in the Greek. There are other Greek words for “working” (*energia*) and “power” (*dunamis*) that is “on the move” so to speak. This word refers to the “official” or “title” kind of power. In other words “exercising authority” (*kate-exousia-ousin*) in this context means good old fashion badge-flashing: an ongoing, regular practice of using your position, your superior resources, your superior record, any advantage you can to say, in effect, “Look at me and look at you—now shut up and get back

in your hole...Who's going to believe *you*...You're a mess; who are *you* to say that...Be more like *me*, just do what *I did*."

And so Jesus divides the old from the new in this way by decreeing: *But it shall not be so among you (43)*. Lording it over others in any way is not Christianity. It must be resisted. It is a false gospel and any church that excuses lording it over others will be an apostate church in a short time because it is more in love with its suburban will power religion than it is with Jesus' get-down-and-dirty-for-anybody-at-every-moment religion!

## B) The New Order is a 'Servant-to-Slave' Progression

1. Against this, Jesus gives us the basic character qualification of a leader in the kingdom: *But whoever would be great among you must be your servant (44a)*. The first thing we have to get straight is that the longing for greatness, to make your life count, to make a dent, is not the problem. Jesus appeals to this sense—**whoever would be great**—so that this is not Jesus pitting what is good against what is great, but rather exposing false greatness and defining true greatness. And true greatness is humility. Everything else will fade away but what is lowly now. All counterfeit greatness will be burned and humility will be turned to glory: "The Lord lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground" [Ps. 147:6]. The Lord will lift you up, but you can only be lifted up if you're down. Also notice that Jesus uses the word "servant" to describe the new leader. We often hear of a servant-leader as if it's one kind of leader, the most biblical and attractive kind to be sure, but only one kind. What Jesus is saying is that this is the only thing you want on your business card that's not going to be burnt on Judgment Day. 'Whoever would do something great that will still be left standing where it counts—that person is a servant—that person doesn't just 'serve' an awful lot: a servant that is always going to extra mile, always bending over backwards, always giving up his or her rights and image and reputation in everything, that's what they are, that's what defines them!'

2. But He's not done: *and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (44b)*. And whoever would be first among this kingdom of servants must think of themselves as slaves. If there was a tax-form in heaven, on the line that says 'Occupation,' you would happily and with a great sense of purpose, that your dream had come true, write on that line, **Slave of all**. In the world that is just a vapor we climb to the top. In the world that is bursting on the scene even now, we make a bee-line for the bottom. In the world-system, the pyramid of the pecking order is upside-down. In real reality, the weight of the house is held up by people who too obsessed with house to be obsessed with themselves [cf. Eph. 4:9-11].

## APPLICATION

**The Church Office of a Deacon** – Jesus uses the word “servant” (*diakonos*) to describe one who is doing something great in the kingdom; and based on this context it is something that people in the world might not consider very great. This is the word from which we derive the English “deacon,” which is one of two offices in the New Testament given to the local church. Why does such an office of ‘servant leader’ exist when, really, every member of the body should be serving? The book of Acts tells us that when the church was growing and taking on more needs, the elders were being stretched beyond their mandate to serve the Word to the flock: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word” [6:2-4].

**The Good News of the Servant King** – As the Head of the body, the Bible says, Jesus descended to the lowest regions...He humbled himself...become obedient to the point of death...He placed the chains of slavery that you and I have sold ourselves into and wore them in our place. And then He was beaten as a slave and killed because our sin commits us to slavery and earns us death. Paul says that Jesus was sent by God to be “born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” [Gal. 4:4-5].