

Greatest Leaders, Greater Servants
Mark 10:35-45
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Introduction

According to some, this is the season of Advent – a time to contemplate the incarnation of God, concentrating on his coming in the form of man, not simply appearing out of the sky fully formed, but as a child. He comes in the fullness of humanity. Emmanuel, God with us, is also God for us – the little babe in the manger is there for a reason of cosmic proportions.

Low entrances

I grew up a little bit more than an hour or so from Hershey, PA, and so school trips would regularly go the theme park there. It was always an exciting time. Hanging out with friends, going on the various roller coasters it was great. On thing I remember very clearly about my first few trips was that at every ride there was a candy bar, Mr. Goodbar, Crackle bars, Chocolate bars. Each would then have a sign that said, “You must be this tall to ride.” As I got older I could ride on more and more, I remember being excited when I finally got taller than the largest chocolate bar, I could ride everything! It was great.

Our passage, and indeed several pericopes that precede it, are the exact reverse. The call of disciples and further, their roles as leaders, is one that is as though the various candy bars get lower and lower. We must receive faith like a child. (Lower) We must not store up our treasures in earth and not heaven. (Lower) Many who are first will be last, and the last first. (Lower) True greatness is being a slave to all. (Lower.)

In a world were churches attempt to glean new leadership models from business models and any other source we ought to stand convicted. We might think that the sons of Zebedee were foolish and that they didn’t get the message, low is high, got it... next, please. Dismissing the true depth of these passages, that to serve means drinking the bitter cup and a baptism of suffering. This isn’t just some kind of paradoxical Zen Koan, this is real advice for those who would follow Christ, most particularly those that would claim roles of leadership within His church. There is no hidden meaning here, but that may be what makes this passage the easiest to dismiss in our minds, certainly it is often dismissed in my own. I spiritualize this, I make it more mysterious than it is, it becomes mystical, it becomes distant. It becomes ineffective. Our familiarity with this passage can never be such that it doesn’t cut us a little deeper each time we read it. My parents live in a very old house, well over 200 years old, that has a cellar that is low, a little over 5 feet. Despite knowing how low this ceiling was my entire life I, to this day, hit my head on it. That low ceiling is much like this passage; it has never moved and yet we constantly find ourselves hitting it. **In Christ’s kingdom the greater the leader means the greater the servant.**

When you walked into this room did you duck? What if I lowered the door by 6 inches? 12? 18? 24? Eventually all of us would be forced to crawl. When we look at today’s passage we might find ourselves walking through without any difficulty, but if we look closer at our lives in light of the passage we must say, “Lord let me stoop today and more tomorrow, so that I might serve you.”

I. We find new desires in light of Christ.

A. Desiring our selves and our glory

If you want to be disappointed in the disciples of Christ this passage is a perfect place to look. Here we have two trusted men, these sons of thunder, coming up to the Lord, demanding that he do “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you (v35).” This is a shocking question, and what is more shocking is that instead of dismissing it, it is responded to. “What do you want me to do for you?” It is with this question that we find what could simply have been dismissed become a moment of teaching for the disciples. “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” It is revealed, these positions, the positions of greatest honor next to a king.

Contrast between what they would ask compared to blind Bartimeaus in the following pericope. He asks for faith, they ask for honor.

The brothers hope to honor Jesus while honoring themselves. How easily worship and discipleship are blended with self-interest; or worse, self-interest is masked as worship and discipleship.

They don't get the big picture. Christ's cup, which was his portion, is a portion of bitterness. His baptism, a baptism of suffering. These are the marks of those who share his path.

A. Only one freeing option, to desire Christ's kingdom.

In Christ, self-serving desires become the desire to serve others.

Philippians 1:21–26 (ESV)

²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Our desires can be masters over us, but the to give glory to God and not seek our own glory is liberation.

Romans 6:17–18 (ESV)

¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

In this way, we feel dissatisfied with ourselves, and become truly humble, while we are inflamed with new desires to seek after God, in whom each may regain those good qualities of which all are found to be utterly destitute – John Calvin. (2.i.1)

When asked tested by a scribe we find the following passage recorded in Mark 12, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The most important is,

‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28a-31)

In the fallen world, looking out for number one is the main priority, but in Christ’s kingdom, God becomes the number one. However, number two isn’t the old number one, it isn’t you, it is others. This radically different reality is the one that the Boanerges keep missing. There is a tremendous irony, throughout this portion of Mark – they should know better, they’ve been hearing Jesus handle questions about the kingdom and the nature of Glory, but they miss it. We have benefits they don’t – we can look at the whole story, we can see this by looking at the Bible, and we can now live this, thanks to the Holy Spirit, by seeking to desire, that is to seek the things in our heart that God would have us seek, and thanks to the clarity of Christ we know that comes in desiring, loving God – and secondly, loving others.

II. We Find Our New Way Glory in the Kingdom of God Not in the Kingdom of Men.

The Kingdoms of the World:

These two kingdoms are not like each other! One might even say that the Kingdom of Christ is the opposite:

⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

In the world, power consolidates and seeks more power. In the corporate world the most important companies are the ones with the most power, they’ve absorbed other companies, demonstrated great business acumen. It is from this world that most of the leadership books come from, theories of structure and authority.

However this wasn’t some alien concept to the people of the first century, they knew about power and authority. The kings and powers of their day fought wars for power, sought to occupy land. Israel itself was one of these occupied lands, and although administered by a governor, constantly sought to exert independence. It perceived power as being able to rule itself.

The Kingdoms of His Christ:

This passage radically defines the organizational structure of the church. Although on a level it has greater and lessers, the means by which this is determined is a criterion unique to the church.

Instead of leaders who have servants, we have servant leaders. We are all to serve one another, and the more we serve is an indication of our true greatness.

James and John were likely asking out of an expectation of worldly glory, but Christ gives us glorious humility.

Our realization and practice of these new values must be counter-cultural. We are warned that the ways of leadership and power found in the world will forever be inadequate for the church, to tweak Christ’s expression, “it is not so among us.” Although the passage is most expressly directed at leaders, the paradigm for the whole church is exhibited.

III. We Find a New Kind of Leader in this Kingdom

So what do we find here? That we are to serve one another, that the leaders of the church are to serve us – and as it is their calling we are to receive their service humbly. The greatest leader is the one who serves all of us, Christ.

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Not just morals, but a model; not just a model, but also a savior.

We will never be able to out-serve Christ. So what do we do, we receive Christ's service. In a way that is very foundation of Christian faith, it is the reception of Christ's offering of himself as a ransom for us, as our greatest servant. Faith in light of this is more about being than doing – the servant came to serve, a service of seeking and saving. We can't serve in order to pay this ransom, I must receive the service of Christ – that he has been my redeemer. He has purchased me from the powers of sin and death; it is in the purchasing of us from this fallen state that we are also lifted up out of its orders and authorities and into a new world's orders and authorities. The paradigm of servant leadership becomes the paradigm for the church, which is the embodiment of the eternal kingdom in the visible, hear-and-now.

Conclusion:

So we receive, but in receiving we have first to behold.

And so we return to where we started, to advent. Behold church, the Son of Man, came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. He is God with us, Emmanuel.

In Christ's kingdom the greater the leader means the greater the servant.

Christ came as a man to serve mankind. We, who have been served, serve others – our service becomes as the very declaration of angels – Joy to the world, the Lord is come. We behold Him, we believe in Him, and we rejoice in Him.

In Christ's kingdom the greater the leader means the greater the servant – and Christ is our greatest servant.