

The Greatness of Being a Servant (Mark 10:42-45)

What is a deacon, what is a servant, according to Jesus? What is God's kingdom all about? What is of first importance to Jesus and why did he come? What's the greatest identity to Jesus? What's the theme of the gospel according to Mark? This text answers all that.

Mk 10:35 *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."*³⁶ *And he said to them, "What do 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 *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?"*³⁹ *And they said to him, "We are able."* *And 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 *And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.*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.*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."*

Many believe Mk 10:45 is the most critical and pivotal verse in the gospel of Mark. It's the theme or purpose statement of the ministry of our Servant-Savior. It's why Jesus came to earth: to glorify God by humbly serving others, sacrificing self for them as a ransom to satisfy God. This is the summary or theme of Mark's good news: the Son came to serve and give His life for others, and so must we.

The key word in this text and in this gospel is the word 'servant.' The Greek word is *deaconos*, that's sometimes translated 'deacon,' but it just means *servant*. Jesus says in v. 43 *But whoever would be great among you must be your servant...* That's the noun *deaconos* and the verb form of that is used in v. 45 (like servant and serving in English, same root). *Among you*, Jesus says, among Christians, greatness must be defined as the one who is *your servant*, one who serves fellow Christians. The role of servant is great in the eyes of the Lord, but v. 42 says in the eyes of the world greatness is being a lord over people. The rulers of the world exercise authority over servants, but Jesus redefines greatness as being the humble servant.

In v. 44 Jesus adds '*whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all*,' different Greek word *doulos*, not just a servant, but the lowest of all servants in their society, slaves. A slave was the last thing any self-respecting person aspired to, but Jesus says if you want to be first in my kingdom, in Christ's society, you must be last and lowest, serving everyone. We heard in the context these disciples were wishing for first place, top seats in Jesus' kingdom, but He redirected them to a slave role under the seat, washing feet! Look at v. 31: *But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*

The kingdom values of Christ turned upside-down the ideas of the disciples. God's ways are not man's ways in terms of the kingdom and in how authority and greatness is defined. Man's way for Jesus was to drive the Romans from Israel, exercise authority or kill them. Look at Mk 8:31. He wasn't about to drive away Roman soldiers, they would soon drive nails in His hands and feet. Jesus tells them He's not there to kill the enemy nations, in fact He's going to be killed by those enemies through the leaders of their own nation.

8:31 *And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.*³² *And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*³³ *But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*

³⁴ *And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*

Peter rebuked Jesus because the Lord's way was not Peter's way. It isn't beyond us, though, to do the same thing. We may not lecture the Lord out loud, but our hearts can be adamant about our way, so much so, we aren't even hearing what the Lord is saying or drown out all counsel that's different than our desires. Our default is to set our thoughts on the things of man, not the things of God, the cross. Man's way focuses on self. God's way: deny self, take up the cross

Sometimes our desires aren't bad, they're just not balanced. Peter knew biblical promises of a Messiah ruling this nation, above all nations as Prince of Peace and Mighty God and the government to be upon His shoulders (Isa 9:6, Isa 11, etc.). Peter wasn't wrong to long for the fulfillment of those promises, but he was wrong to put his focus only on the passages he liked and to miss that Messiah is first the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Suffering and serving is the path to His greatness, the cross must come before the crown. It was Satan who tempted Jesus by the kingdom without the cross, so the suffering Servant tells Peter here he's talking just like the serpent.

In v. 33 Jesus rebukes Peter for rebuking Jesus and He tells him to get behind, even calling Peter '*Satan*' to make the point as strong as possible that's the source of that thinking and speaking. If we set our mind on man's things rather than God's, we're like the devil. It's Satanic to think or say or set our mind on man's way instead of God's way. We're talking like Lucifer when we say 'I will' to God instead of praying submissively '*Thy will be done*' (see Isaiah 14).

We may not think we have the audacity of Peter in verse 33 to rebuke Jesus out loud, to say 'that's not part of the plan I have,' but in our heart of hearts when things don't go the way we want, when there is suffering instead of celebration, we think our way is better. If Peter, one of the strongest of the 12 apostles could fall here, we need to heed this warning. God's ways are not man's way, they're as different and as distant as the heavens are above the earth. The world tells us self-advancement is key, self-empowerment, self-esteem, self-help ... but the Word tells us we can't help ourselves in terms of salvation, we need to esteem Christ more, empowered by Christ who in v. 34 says self-denial is key, not self-advancement.

We live in a self-centered world. There's even a magazine called *Self*. Self-promotion is fueled by social media. Self-worth is tied up in what people think of us, if they like us, even how many likes we get online when we post our selfies, or how many follow us online. But Christ says in v. 34 His followers find their worth in Christ, we need to be followers of Him, we need to lay down self, deny self, die to self (that's what take up your cross is, death of self). He just told them in v. 31 He's going to a cross, to His death, now in v. 34 He tells them they must take up their cross, i.e., death to self. In v. 35 He talks about losing self to find your life following Him.

The parallel in Luke 9:23 adds this '*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*' This is no self-fulfillment motivational speech to help us gain a superior position in this life, it's the end of self for gain in the next.

We sang: So I will go wherever He is calling me
I lose my life to find my life in Him
I give my all to gain the hope that never dies
I bow my heart, take up my cross and follow Him¹

9:30 *They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise."*

³² *But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.* ³³ *And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?”* ³⁴ *But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.* ³⁵ *And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”*

There's the word *deacons* again, servants are first to God. Last is not least to the Lord. Who's the greatest is who's the lowest. Jesus illustrates what it means to be a servant. Jesus makes it practical in v. 36 by putting a little child among them and taking this toddler in His arms. Then in v. 37 Jesus tells them receiving a child like that in His name is receiving Jesus. In other words, service to the littlest is how we serve the greatest Lord Jesus. Preaching to big crowds isn't the Lord's measure of greatness, having a big following or big church doesn't make you great, the Lord sees the quiet lady serving in the nursery, ministering to children, receiving toddlers into her arms like Jesus did in v. 36 and v. 37 says that servant receives me (as He said in Mt 25 'what you did the least of these you do to me')

In v. 41 Jesus says those who give a brother a cup of water to drink because of Christ, they will be rewarded by Christ. It's not the big things, it's the little people, doing little things, little acts of mercy and kindness. I'm not greater to God because I'm on stage, my wife is just as great if not greater as she serves our young kids faithfully. The Women's Ministry ladies are no less important than the guys you'll see at the end of this service, in fact the ladies actually invest greater time in ministries Jesus calls great and in greater ways than some guys on stage can because of their unique gifting. The elders are certainly not greater than the deacons, Jesus says in Mk 10:43 being your deacon (deacons=servant) is the greatest role to God. We're all to be servants, churches just need recognized servants to facilitate service. Some have titles but we're all the Lord's servants and those who the world considers last and least are first to Christ. It's in this context the Lord talks about His value-reversing gospel.

10:31 *'many who are first will be last, and the last first.'* [then in v. 33 He explains] *“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles.* ³⁴ *And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”* ³⁵ *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.”*

That's really an incredible way to talk to Jesus and real insensitive timing! Jesus just said He's about to be mocked, spit on, flogged, killed, and all James and John can say is basically 'we want you to do whatever we want. Whatever we ask, we want you to promise to do what we ask. Whatever we say, we want you to do it, Jesus.' They're not concerned for Jesus and what He's about to endure, or what He might ask of them, what the Lord would want from them. They don't ask how they can serve, they tell him how they want it. They didn't get the object lesson in v. 15 (humility/childlikeness).

³⁶ *And he said to them, “What do 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.”* To put it in the vernacular: we call shotgun when you come riding into your kingdom! We got dibs as you ride in on your horse to your Jerusalem throne, we're your go-to guys. Hook us up, set us up front and center, left and right, John and James are your #1 and #2. First and second place, top seats. If you want to decide which of us gets left or right we'll leave that up to you, but the rest of it we've got figured out, Jesus here's the plan

That's the opposite of what we saw last week, asking God in Jesus' name, for His glory. James and John are asking for their own name to be greatly honored in the glory to come. The Pharisees wanted chief seats in the synagogue, the disciples now wanted chief seats in the kingdom. Scripture says men will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God in His kingdom, now the disciples said to Him 'we want in on some of that action, sitting at your right hand.'

Matthew 20 gives a little more insight into the Zebedee family, it says their mom also had a significant role in this: *Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons ... She said to [Jesus], "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left."* (20:20-21 NASB)

That's a Jewish mom with plans for her boys: command this, Lord, reserve the greatest seats in the kingdom for the great sons of mine. You wonder where James and John got it from, momma must have fueled the pride for these boys as she tells Jesus what to command? There's a sobering reminder here to parents of the influence of their traits on their kids for better or worse, how parental pride, control can take over instead of submitting our desires to a sovereign Lord. Parents can fuel their kids' entitlement, arrogance, over-confidence

³⁸ *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?"* ³⁹ *And they said to him, "We are able."* *And 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.*

Jesus was about to go through a baptism of fire in suffering, about to drink the cup of suffering on the cross, pouring out His life unto death, and He asks them are you ready and able to go through that? Jesus is patient and gracious with these brothers who didn't know what they were asking. He wants them to know the way to glory is first through Gethsemane, before His throne He'll wear thorns, and before the crown must come the cross. That's what Jesus would go through before He takes His seat in His kingdom, He asks are you able to suffer/die like me? They say self-confidently 'yes we can.' Then Jesus graciously promises He would give them grace for that as they would suffer and die for Him, but He patiently explains it's not about favors for asking first. God's in charge of that, not them.

⁴¹ *And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. [why? they beat 'em to the punch, asking first for the top seats]* 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. 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."*

4 application questions: 1) Has this gospel changed you?

To ask it another way, are you still living for self or are you living for the Savior? Are you a servant of Christ? Believers are servants of Christ, it's just a question as to whether we will be good faithful servants. If you're not His servant and wanting to serve Him, you're not a believer. The application for you is not 'try harder, be a good person, do enough good works, self-determination.' It's self-denial. It's recognizing there's nothing in you good enough to please God, you need someone else's good works for you (Christ's in His life and death and resurrection). You're not a good person naturally, you're a sinner and your debt is a massive price you could never pay, but the Son of Man gave His life to pay that ransom for many, to buy them back from the slave market of sin to make them His. How do you know that's you? Deny self, take the cross, and follow

Are you now His slave, meaning you know Jesus as Master who owns you and so you're not your own, but are bought with a price, wanting to obey and glorify Him with your life? The essence of Christianity is "Jesus is Lord" (Master, slave language). Be saved by grace by trusting in Jesus as your Master and be slaved by grace

2nd question: Is the gospel humbling you?

As believers, are you being humbled by the gospel? In Mark 8-10, 3 different times Jesus talks about His death and resurrection (facts of the gospel), each time their pride flared up, so He addressed it. But this isn't just about James and John. If we feel indignant at them, or feel superior to them, we're no better than them or the other disciples in v. 41, who felt this way and were self-righteous.

Notice that in verse 42, Jesus doesn't just direct this corrective teaching on humility to James and John. He calls all of them to Himself again. It's not just James and John who needed it. This is for all of us to hear, including (or especially) those of us who look down on others who *we think are more arrogant than us*, those we have self-righteous indignation toward, thinking that we're better.

The book *Humility: True Greatness* asks: 'Can you see yourself in this story? It's easy for us at times to disdain the disciples and fail to recognize our face in their portrait. They argued on the road about who was the greatest; we may not openly argue about this, but don't we engage in the same debate every day in our private thoughts? If you're like me, you compare yourself to others ...'²

We need to hear this again and again just like the disciples did but even with the best teacher, Jesus Himself, they still didn't get it, so Jesus showed them. In v. 49 Jesus on the way to Jerusalem stops to serve a blind man, someone overlooked and ignored by society. In v. 51 Jesus asks him '*What do you want me to do for you?*' (exactly what he asked James and John in v. 36). But this man gives a better answer: he says he just wanted to see. He just wanted to see Jesus, His disciples got to see what Jesus meant by being a '*servant of all*'

Chapter 11 is Palm Sunday and Thursday of that week Jesus shows even further what He meant by '*be your servant*' and '*slave of all*': In the upper room while they're still arguing about who's greatest, Jesus practiced what He preached here, putting on a towel to wash the feet of these men who wanted to be great. He showed them the definition of greatness, a lowly humble servant, serving as a slave. The Son of Man was not served at the last supper table, He came to serve as a slave, and then He gave His life as a ransom for many. If you're battling with pride, spend time in the gospel, especially right here. Jesus was their servant, serving as a slave of all the disciples. Phil 2 says He emptied Himself, humbled Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and was obedient to the point of death on a cross

3rd question: Is the gospel shaping what you see as great?

Notice Jesus doesn't rebuke their desire to be first or to be great.

Jesus doesn't rebuke that desire, He redirects the desire to be first and redefines what it means to be great. First of all is the lowest of all slaves, and true greatness is humbly being a servant of others to the glory of the Savior who came to serve and gave Himself for us.

Here's some of the ways I've seen greatness these past two weeks:

- in a brother who provided wood for a single mom in our church and in a family that provided clothes to a single dad
- it's on display in babies among us and their caring moms
- I saw it Thursday at lunch: a friend serving a plate for his blind friend who knows scriptures in braille better than us
- I saw it in little boys singing songs at an old folks home
- we see it in ladies providing meals for needs in the body
- I see it in people caring for disabled family members here
- I've seen a team of ladies rally around our sister coming home from the hospital long before any prayer chain email
- I've seen brothers and sisters sacrifice long hours to serve members in need past two weeks in counsel, prayer, care
- I've seen a married couple going through relation struggle begin to humbly admit sin and seek to serve in little things
- I saw it Thursday night with many serving young children
- I see in others using gifts behind the scenes in many ways
- Gospel-defined greatness is all around us to eyes that see

4th question: Are you serving motivated by the gospel?

The motivation for being a servant in v. 43 and a slave in v. 44 is v. 45: *even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life* ... These apostles would become the servant-leaders of the early church, but they weren't to exercise authority like pagan rulers did to demonstrate their greatness. Jesus says '*but it shall not be so among you.*' The apostle Peter got this, at least he later did when he wrote to fellow servant-leaders serving '*the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight*' [not exercising raw power like worldly leaders, but caring overseeing, he adds not for gain, not domineering/lording over those in your care, 1 Pet 5]

So for the servant-leaders who will join me on stage in just a few moments, let this remind me and you we're not just servants, we're slaves of the Lord. We're not be a lord over people, domineering, we're to give oversight, but it's by serving motivated by the Lord who served us despite our sin and gave Himself as a ransom to pay for our sin. That should motivate us to serve fellow sinful disciples

Every believer is a servant, the question is will we be good and faithful. In the early church in Acts 6 the apostles saw the need for an additional group of servant-leaders to help care for the needs of the body, to be put over the task of making sure the benevolence and body needs aren't neglected and to also help the shepherds not neglect their priority of prayer and the ministry of the Word. These seven men were the pattern and prototype of those called deacons in 1 Tim 3 where Paul talks about '*the office of overseers...deacons likewise...those who have served well as deacons obtain for them-selves a high standing and great confidence in the faith*' (v. 1, 8, 13 NASB). This is a great work and your servant-leaders need prayer.

O Master, let me walk with Thee
 In lowly paths of service free;
 Tell me Thy secret; help me bear
 The strain of toil, the fret of care.
 Help me the slow of heart to move
 By some clear, winning word of love;
 Teach me the wayward feet to stay,
 And guide them in the homeward way.
 Teach me Thy patience! still with Thee
 In closer, dearer company,
 In work that keeps faith sweet and strong,
 In trust that triumphs over wrong³

¹ "What Grace is Mine," Getty Music.

² C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness*, p. 42.

³ Washington Gladden, "O Master Let Me Walk With Thee."