

Servant Leadership

Following Jesus to the Cross: Part 18
Mark 10:41-45 (Mt. 20:24-28) 6/6/2020

Summary: Seeking human greatness incites the same sin in others. The world’s way is to gain control of people and get them to serve your interests. The way of greatness is to serve the interests of others (from footwashing to meeting their eternal needs).

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Mark 10:41 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.”

Introduction: Who Wants to Be Great?

The World on Fire

It sure does seem like the world is on fire, doesn’t it—literally in the case of our major cities. We’re not even half way through the year and already Our President has been impeached Our economy what shut down and 40 million people lost their jobs Massive, widespread corruption at the highest levels of our government are being exposed And most of that has been forgotten because of the current crisis—riots, beatings, and murders all across the country Normally, 6 months away from a Presidential election, 99% of the headlines are about the campaigns. But with all this, you have to dig pretty deep in the news to find anything about the election. What’s going on? Do all these things have something in common? Yes, they do. They are all springing from the same root problem. It’s all coming from a God-given desire that has become twisted into an evil desire by our sin. And Jesus is going to address both the good desire and the twisted version in today’s passage.

Greatness

In Mark 10:43 Jesus holds out a carrot that he expects us to get excited about and run after. It's a prize that we have to pay a huge price to get, but Jesus expects us to desire this prize so much that we'll happily pay any price. Here's what Jesus says—this is the carrot: **“Whoever among you wants to become great ...”** At that point we should all jump up and down and wave our hand and say, “oooh—me, me, me, me!” God designed us with a drive to desire greatness—and not the lame, cheesy earthly greatness in the eyes of men, but true greatness, where God himself lays his hand on you and says, “Well done!”

The Anger of the 12

James and John wanted to be great, but they weren't looking for the divine, “Well done.” They just wanted to beat out the rest of the 12 and get the top two spots. They wanted to drag the earthly concept of greatness into heaven.

Mark 10:37 “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 You don't realize you just asked for a big, fat helping of suffering, and your wish is going to be granted.

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.

I don't know about you, but I would love to have heard more about that. And for all we know Jesus might have expounded on that some more, given how often the idea of God preparing a place for us is mentioned in the Apostles' writings. But Mark doesn't say anything more about it here because that's not the point he's making. The point Jesus wants his disciples to get, and that Mark wants us to get, is about the relationship between three things.

When I study a passage, I'm always looking for the main point of that section of Scripture, so when I preach it, all the points I make revolve around and support that main point. As I studied this one, I was trying to figure out, what's the main point? Is this passage mainly about Jesus' death as a ransom? It begins and ends with that. Then I study a little more and say, “No, it's mainly about humility and servanthood.” Then I get further in my study and say, “No, this is a passage that's all about suffering with Christ.” Finally I realized, the main point of this passage isn't any of those; it's how those three fit together—the relationship between greatness, suffering, and servanthood. And to teach us that, Mark skips ahead to the moment when the other ten disciples found out, somehow, about what James and John tried to pull. I don't know if Jesus told them about it, or if James and John brought it up to the group, or if a bystander overheard, or what, but somehow they get wind of it, and they are not amused. In fact, they're downright angry.

Mark 10:41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.

Stimulating Sin in Others

Why were they mad at James and John? Is it because they were sticking up for Jesus? “You Zebadees are so insensitive. The guy just got done telling you he's going to suffer and die, and you ask a question like that? You're way out of line!” Was that it? No. We know that wasn't it because when Jesus addresses the whole group, he gives the same correction about seeking earthly greatness to all 12 of them. Which means the ten were making the same mistake as the 2, and all 12 needed to learn the same lesson about humility, servanthood, and suffering. So no, it's not that they thought James and John were out of line; it was that they thought James and John were *cutting* in line.

It could be the others were each planning on making a play of their own like this when the time was right. Maybe they thought, “I need to make my move as soon as possible—not right now because Jesus just said the thing about dying again. I’ll let that settle for a bit, then I’ll talk to him.”

That could be. Or, maybe it never even occurred to them until James and John did it. It never even crossed their minds, but then when the sons of thunder made a move, they thought, “Wait a minute ...” and suddenly, as soon as they felt two of their peers trying to pass them up, they thought, “I’ve got to get into the race.”

x Here’s a principle to remember: Nothing will bring out the worst in your heart more than someone trying to step on you to get to the rung in the ladder above you. When we sin, it tends to stimulate the same kind of sin in those around us—especially when it’s a sin of selfishness or elevating ourselves above others in a quest for human greatness. The other guy can be doing just fine, but the second he senses me trying to lift myself above him, suddenly his urges to lift himself up above me flare up. That’s obvious in every context of life—even on the highway. You do something to establish your dominance and supremacy on the highway, and what effect does that have on the drivers around you? Does it make them tend to be more gracious and accommodating? Nope. It makes them downright deadly.

It happens at work, it happens online—in debates, it happens everywhere, including the church. In the church we have to be a lot more subtle about it. But it still happens—everything from trying to outshine everyone else in how insightful your comments are in a Bible study, to jockeying for a position on the worship team or elder board or staff, or trying to be that parent who is clearly doing a better job raising your kids than everyone else is doing. And every time we do that, only God knows how much sin we provoke in the hearts of others.

And that seems to be what’s happening here. James and John’s effort to grab greatness revived the previous argument about who was the greatest. Jesus had put that argument to bed back in ch. 8, but now James and John reawaken it.

The Needle in Others’ Eyes

Looking at it from the outside, this scene is almost comical. How were the 12 mad at James and John for doing something they themselves wanted to do? They wanted to be on top, so how can they get mad at James and John for wanting to get on top?

There’s really nothing unusual about that. We all do that.¹ We’re all quick to condemn in others what we excuse in ourselves. And it takes a Nathan to point that out to us, doesn’t it? Remember Nathan? He comes to David and tells him about a guy who stole a poor man’s only sheep even though he had a bunch of his own, and David flies off the handle—“That man deserves to die!” And Nathan says, “Yeah, David—that man is you.” Our sins are so easy to spot in others, and so easy to rationalize in ourselves that we don’t even see them until a Nathan comes along to show us.

Jesus Restores Unity

Well, Jesus is going to play the role of Nathan here. 42 Jesus called them together For those people who are always so shocked when they see disunity in the church—don’t be shocked. It’s been that way from the very beginning. Jesus hasn’t even died yet and we already have the first church split. When it says they were indignant in v.41—that’s a strong word. Then ten were really angry at James and John.

This is an ugly situation, and a serious one. How are these 12 men going to turn the world upside down if they’re fighting among themselves? And it’s not like Jesus has another couple years to work on these guys. This is days before the crucifixion. There’s not much time left for this group to get their act together. So when Jesus called the two factions together here, that’s an important moment, because the whole apostolic band could have crashed and burned before they even got started if Jesus doesn’t take some decisive action.

¹ Romans 2:1.

42 Jesus called them together and said He called them together and taught them about humility. What would happen if all churches, when division began to arise, gathered both sides together, and read the words Jesus spoke to his divided disciples on this occasion?

Jesus' Correction

The World's Way

So what did Jesus tell them? He begins with something they know. 42 Jesus called them together and said, "You *know* He's going to give them an example of the wrong approach to greatness that they know all about and can easily relate to.

42 ... "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.

Not so with you—authority and leadership in the kingdom of God are fundamentally different from the way it's done in the world. The word translated "high officials" is literally *great ones*. Jesus is right back to talking about earthly greatness as opposed to true greatness. And what's the standard for earthly greatness? The opinions of people—nothing else. That's the only standard for human greatness in the world—what people think. That's why in v.42 instead of referring to "the rulers of the Gentiles," Jesus calls them "**those who are regarded as rulers.**" He's pointing them to this world's standard for human greatness. These are the people who are considered great because they are considered great. The only thing that makes them great is the fact that their greatness is widely accepted. Everyone acknowledges, "Yep, they are in charge," and that's what makes them the great ones.

Lording it Over

And what do they do with their power and authority? Jesus says they "lord it over" people. That phrase means to exercise control over people. They love having the power to control people and get their way.

Now, when Jesus says we know this—it's never been more obvious in our country in my lifetime than it is now. I told you all the chaos we've seen this year has one root cause in common, namely, worldly greatness.

First, the COVID lockdown. When the two-week lockdown got extended, and they were talking about mailing everyone money, I told Tracy, "Look out. The politicians are going to see dollar signs. There will be no restraints on spending, and it's going to get out of control." That did happen, but even more than money, what really made the politicians' eyes bug out was power.

When the Federal government lifted its recommendations, the State and local governments took over. And we got all these stories of ridiculous displays of lording their power over the people. An elderly couple was sitting on a beach, that was open to the public, and the police came and told them they could sit there, but not in chairs. They would have to sit on the ground. You can fish from a canoe but not a motorboat. And if a family of 3 wants to go on a boat, one has to stay on shore. You can't mow your lawn. In Texas, they arrested two young women accused of salon activities. They caught these women through an undercover sting operation. Members of the COVID-19 task force enforcement detail contacted the women, scheduled an appointment to have their eyebrows done, went in under cover, when the 20-year-old gal started work on the eyebrows, they arrested her and she's facing 180 days in jail and a \$2000 fine. What is all that? It's politicians drunk with power.

And when people like that get a taste of that kind of power, they don't give it up easily. That was really seen in stark relief during the impeachment hearings. Whatever you think of President Trump, one thing that we can say for sure is that under his administration, a whole lot of people in the executive branch who used to have lots of power, suddenly didn't have that power anymore—Democrats and

Republicans—they responded the same. People who are supposed to be advisors, but who really called the shots in their area in previous administrations, when President Trump overruled them and didn't go their way, they did everything they possibly could to regain the power they had before with no regard whatsoever for the law or the Constitution or anything else. And now, all this corruption that's being exposed in the Federal government—it's all about people in power lording it over people—FBI, CIA, FISA courts, congressmen, and unelected bureaucrats—destroying people's lives and trampling their rights. It's all about power.

And I can't think of any symbol that sums all that up better than that image of Derek Chauvin crushing the life out of George Floyd, surrounded by people begging him to let Floyd up, knowing he was on camera, and just looking around with a smug smile. "I have the power to do this, and there's nothing you can do about it." That snapshot perfectly illustrates the attitude of lording power and authority over people. And there's not an uglier image in all the world.

Except, maybe, the images of the rioters beating innocent people to death or lighting a home on fire with a little child in it and then blocking fire fighters' access. Supposedly, they are protesting Derek Chauvin lording his power over George Floyd. But what are *they* doing? Using their power to lord it over people. When you have a huge gang of thugs in the street with no police around, guess who's in power? The thugs. And what do they do with that power? Do they use it for good? No. They use it to do the very things they are supposedly protesting.

Can you imagine if those rioters held governmental power? If you got pulled over for speeding, instead of writing you a ticket, they would smash your window and beat you unconscious. They aren't against the abuse of power; they just want to be the ones abusing it.

The "me too" movement revved up when Harvey Weinstein was exposed, and it became evident how rampant the problem was of men in positions of power using that power to pressure women sexually. So the "me too" movement sought to shift power away from people like that in the direction of women. Believe all women. When a woman makes an accusation, throw the guy in jail. And the result? Justice? No. Large numbers of men ended up in jail on false accusations. How did that happen? It happened because the female heart is just as fallen as the male heart, and when anyone has power, the natural response of the fallen human heart is to use that power to lord it over others. You can shift power from evil rich men to evil poor women, or from evil cops to evil minorities, but however you shuffle the power around, you end up with the same thing—whoever ends up with the power lords it over the rest.

This reality proves true in every company, every office, every business, every school, every playground—everywhere where some people are stronger or more powerful than other people. The world's concept of authority and power and greatness is all about how many people are under you. How many people serve your interests. When you're a bigshot, people open doors for you and drive you around and fetch you coffee. It's a cliché in the movies when a secretary gets offended if her boss sends her to get his coffee. So demeaning. Why is that demeaning? Because, if you're important, people get you coffee; you don't fetch them coffee.

For human beings to behave that way is as natural as the sunrise. You see it in every culture at every level.

So when Jesus said, "You know the Gentiles are like this," it's really true. And it's a temptation for church leaders as well. Peter uses this same term—to *lord it over*—in his words to pastors in 1 Pe. 5.

1 Peter 5:2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Even pastors fall into this. As soon as you're in a position of power, it's tempting to use that power to make people serve you—to use people to serve your agenda, rather than using your power to serve them. And it can look very spiritual, because you're just trying to get people to get on board with a really important ministry. But you find that you use your influence to pressure people to participate in your ministry ideas, but you don't move a finger to support their ministry ideas.

Servant Leadership

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.

Strive to be the one who fetches the coffee. And if that statement rubs your wrong, you're in the wrong religion. A senior pastor of a huge megachurch, or a president of a prestigious seminary, who thinks he's above fetching coffee for his secretary is in the wrong religion. If you think it's your wife's job to serve you instead of your job to serve her, you're in the wrong religion.

In the kingdom of God, we still have authority and submission, we still have people who make decisions and call shots—God ordained all that. But authority and leadership in the kingdom is to be *servant* leadership. Instead of looking to control people and use your power to get those people to do what you want, you consider yourself their slave. In previous passages, Jesus said “servant,” here he uses an even more extreme term—a term that offended people back then, and still offends us today, even to the point where people in the church shy away from it. We hate the very concept of slavery. If I tell you to be a servant, you can handle that. But if I tell you that everyone at church is your owner—your master—that probably grates against something inside you. Even Bible translations have replaced the word “slave” with “servant” in many cases to make their translation more marketable. But the word is **slave**. You look at people around you and say, “I’m here for their benefit.” Just as a table waiter is there for one reason—to serve you as you eat, so people who are great in the kingdom of God see themselves as having the role of serving the interests of those under them.

While a worldly leader looks down upon the masses and sees them as being beneath him in dignity, beneath him in importance, beneath him in intelligence, existing to be controlled by him; a leader in the kingdom of God stoops down, gets under the person he's leading, puts his shoulder into it, and lifts them up. And he doesn't see that as going above and beyond the call of duty in any way. That's his role. That's every Christian's job—every follower of Christ, but especially those in leadership positions. What was it that infuriated Jesus about the spiritual leaders of his time?

Matthew 23:4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

We tend to focus on the Pharisees' legalism—the fact that they burdened people with heavy loads. But what bothered Jesus even more than their legalism in this passage was the fact that they didn't help the people bear that burden. Some of the burden was legitimate. There are indeed responsibilities that Scripture places on us and requires of us. But a spiritual leader is not someone who just stands up front and thunders from the pulpit about how everyone is falling short. He rolls up his sleeves and helps them carry the burden. Matthew Henry: “Those that shall be put under your charge, must be as sheep under the charge of the shepherd, who is to tend them and feed them, and be a servant to them, not as horses under the command of the driver.”

You can see this in parts of the world that have Christian influence. For example, through most of world history there was no such title as a Prime Minister. “Minister” means servant. Cultures influenced by the Bible started calling the highest ruler the prime minister--#1 servant. We use that terminology in our country as well, referring to political leaders as public servants. None of that is natural to humanity; it all comes out of this verse right here.

And this applies to all of us, even if you aren't in an official leadership role. All human beings naturally struggle to gain the upper hand in relationships. We do it without even thinking. How can I get my spouse to remember to take out the trash? Or to stop doing this thing that bothers me? How can I get my coworkers or even my boss to go along with my agenda at work?

When you're on the highway, and that other guy is on the highway, and he seems especially anxious to get where he wants to go, is your first thought, *How can I serve him? How could I be a slave to him right now?* Instead of always trying to bend other people's will to align with your interests, you say, “How can I bend my will to align with their interests?” As I've been studying this, I've been trying to

develop that as a habit—every time I encounter another person, to ask, “What are his interests? And how can I serve those interests?” You walk into the living room and your spouse is there: *What are her interests right now?* A co-worker, someone at the grocery store, the guy in the car in front of you on the highway—*What are his interests? And how can I serve those interests?*

That may sound like basic kindergarten morality—put yourself in his shoes, golden rule, etc. It’s almost a cliché. But it’s one thing to mouth the words; it’s another thing to actually live this way. I don’t know how it is for you, but for me, living this way is revolutionary. It’s another revolution every time I do it, because the moment I stop actively thinking about this principle, I instantly drop right back into the perspective of me as the center of the world. How else could it be—I am the center of everything I ever experience, right? Wherever I am, there I am! I don’t know what lunch was like for you today, but I know what it was like for me, because I’m always there at my lunches and hardly ever see yours. I know how I slept last night, everything I saw today—it was all stuff that happened in a certain radius of where I was located. I experience the world from right here, inside this head, inside this body—no one else’s. That’s how I experience life 99% of the time, so when I walk into a room, the most natural thing for me to think is, “What does everything in this room mean to me?” And how do I feel about it? Am I comfortable or uncomfortable? Good mood or bad mood? Anxious, relaxed, happy, irritated—I’ve got my finger on that pulse.

Then I see you and my most natural thought is, “What do you think of me?” And when I think that, that’s not really a thought about you. It’s mainly a thought about me.

And even if I think, “How can I serve you?” or “What can I do for you?”—that’s a great think to think, but it’s still from my point of view. It takes a major shift for me to walk into the room and look at things from your point of view. How does she feel right now? She just said something to me—what are her interests? I’m in a conversation—what is it like for this guy to be in this conversation with me right now—what’s it like for him? What is his goal in this conversation? She wants something to happen—why? What interests would it serve?”

Interests Above Desires

Now, does that mean their wish is your command? Not quite. Sometimes people want something from you that it wouldn’t be loving to give them. So what kinds of ways should we serve? Let’s look at Jesus’ example.

Jesus’ Example

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.

There’s our example for serving people’s interests. Jesus didn’t come into this world to be waited on. He didn’t come to have people hold doors for him or bring him food or perform the unpleasant tasks of life for him so he didn’t have to mow his own yard or clean his own house. He could have come in that kind of posture, like most great kings. But instead, he came to wait on people and wash their feet. If Jesus saw a need, and he could meet it, he did. It didn’t matter how lowly or how small, he served the interests of the people around him.

Beyond Footwashing

But there was a lot more to his servanthood than that.

45 ... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The supreme example of his servanthood was not footwashing; it was giving them something they didn't even want—but needed desperately. We had no idea we needed it, and most of humanity throughout the ages has utterly despised it and rejected it. Many eminent theologians still reject it. I'll talk more about that in the podcast. But the point now is that being a servant isn't mainly about doing whatever people want you to do. Being a servant like Jesus means going as low as you need to go and paying whatever price you need to pay to serve their interests—to provide what they need the most. Very often that means washing feet, getting coffee, cleaning up a mess, cooking a meal, doing a load of laundry (or a never-ending stream of loads of laundry). But much more importantly, it means going as low as you need to go, and laying down your life no matter what the cost, to do what you can do to bring the ransoming work of Jesus to people through the gospel. We do the same thing Jesus did, just different roles. He did the dying; we do the proclaiming. He provided the gift; we deliver the gift. But the greatest servanthood is always getting that gift to people who need it, which is everyone.

Give His Life

Jesus didn't sit down one day and say, "How can I serve these people? What are my gifts? What comes naturally to me? What kinds of ministry tend to energize me? Oh, I know. Being spit on, beaten to a pulp, and murdered. That's really my sweet spot." No, he saw our need and met it. It's good for us to ask all those questions to discover where we fit in the body of Christ and where we should put most of our energy, but we need to make sure we don't stop there. That's our normal way of serving, but we also need to be ready to just see a need and meet it.

The Obstacle: Suffering

Why don't we do that more? If that's what we're here for, and it's the most important thing in the world, why aren't we better servants? We don't do it more because there is a massive obstacle in our way. It's a giant, terrifying, dangerous, roadblock that keeps us from following Jesus' example. What is the obstacle? Suffering.

I don't want to be a servant to my wife right now—that will cut into my comfort. I don't want to be everyone's slave. It will make my life hard. It will cost me time, it will cost me money, it will cost me sleep a lot of times—it will make my life uncomfortable. The Biblical word for that is *suffering*, and none of us like it.

I really don't want to take up my cross and lay down my life for people in ways that really cost me. I don't want to be available for a calling that might require that I give up my house or my job or my career or closeness to my family Why? Because I'm scared to death of suffering.

Fear of suffering and inability to hear the voice of God are directly related. The more afraid I am of suffering, the more stopped up my ears get whenever God calls me to some hard service. And the more I shuffle my feet when Jesus is charging ahead leading me up to Jerusalem.

And so in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells the disciples about his upcoming suffering 5 times, and only tells them the reason for his suffering one time. If we're not willing to suffer with Christ, then knowing why Christ suffered won't do us any good.

The Suffering of Christ

Now, let me give you one final thought that will tie all this together in a way that, at least for me, is mind-blowing. This suffering that I'm talking about—it's not just that it resembles Christ's suffering. It's more than just resemblance. Do you want to hear something amazing?

Colossians 1:24 Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

It's not just that our suffering is *like* Jesus' suffering; it *is* Jesus' suffering. We're finishing up what was lacking in his afflictions.

What is lacking? Was his suffering not quite enough to pay the price of redemption? No—he paid it all. His suffering satisfied the wrath of God 100%, and then some.

So what's lacking? Personal delivery of the gift he purchased. That's what this phrase, to fill up what is lacking, means in the only other place it's used in the Bible.

Philippians 2:30 [Epaphroditus] almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to fill up what was lacking in your service to me.

What was lacking in the Philippians' gift to Paul? Did Epaphroditus pitch in a little bit? Add some cash to the bag? No. The gift wasn't lacking money; it was lacking delivery. All Epaphroditus did was carry the gift and deliver it in person.

And that's the same thing that was lacking in Christ's sufferings. Jesus paid the full price to purchase grace for us, but what he didn't do was deliver that grace to us, face-to-face, in person. He didn't come to your door, your school, your work, and tell you the gospel. That work, which involves a great deal of suffering, is carried out by his body. That's a very real part of the work of redemption. So when you and I suffer why carrying out the work of the ministry, serving his people, bringing his love to people—when we do that and it causes us inconvenience, hardship, costs us money or time—that isn't just suffering *like* Christ; it's the very suffering *of* Christ. We are participating in his work of redemption.

Conclusion

At the beginning I told you the main point of this passage is not greatness or suffering or servanthood—it's the relationship between those three things. Jesus holds out the carrot of true greatness in the eyes of God. The path to that greatness is the path of lowliness, humility, and servanthood. The roadblock that keeps us from being servants is the fact that we're afraid of suffering.

So Jesus walks out ahead of us on the road to Jerusalem and leads the way. He says, "Follow my example of servanthood. Stop striving for human greatness, give the other guy the upper hand and take the lowly position as his slave, do whatever it takes, pay whatever price you have to pay to bring the grace of God to people, yes, it will involve suffering—just keep your eyes on my example so you can press through your fear—do all that, and you will attain greatness. God the Father will lay his great hand upon our shoulder and say, "Well done, great servant. Take the position I have prepared for you in my Son's glory."