

# Leadership and greatness : Mark 10:32-45

[Greetings and prayer.]

Before I start, I want to do a poll of all you here, and also on Zoom. I want those who reckon that they are in a leadership role anywhere (church, work, associations, doesn't matter) to put up their hands. I see that not everyone put their hands up. If you are male and married you should have put your hands up. Husbands you are the head of your household (Eph 5). If you are a follower of Christ, you should also have put up your hands. No one lights a lamp and puts it under the basket. Instead he sets a stand so that it will give light to everyone (Matt 5). As a Christian, you are supposed to be giving light to all, you are therefore a leader. So let's try the question again. If you feel that as a Christian you have been called to be a leader, please put up your hands. Now we are getting somewhere. My sermon today is on leadership and greatness. I am glad to know that it's going to be relevant for ALL of us here today.

Our NT Scripture reading today was taken from Mark 10:32-35. So let's get to it without further ado, we still have a baptism and holy communion after this message! In our Mark 10 passage, we see a scene where 2 of Jesus' disciples James and John asks to be seated one at the right hand and the other at the left hand in his glory. You have heard me say this before: to properly understand a passage, a speech, or even a word, we need to know the context of the passage, or even the context of the relationship between the speaker and the recipient.

Let's look at the context of our Mark 10 passage. The placing of this passage comes right after when Jesus tells his disciples what was going to happen to him when they got to Jerusalem. This is the third time that Jesus predicts his death to his disciples. If you looked up the the first and second times when Jesus predicts his death, (you would be able to find them In Mk 8:31 and Mk 9:30), you will see, quite curiously, a pattern in Mark's ordering of the stories. Three times in Mark's gospel, there is a repeated sequence of :

- 1) Jesus predicts his death,
- 2) The disciples misunderstand what that means,
- 3) Jesus teaches them what it means to follow him.

And we know that when something is repeated 3 times in the bible, especially when it's repeated in quick sequential order, it's something that the bible is calling us to give attention to. Mark wants us to look up and pay attention. It's not only a mis-mash of incidences that he put together in his Gospel. It is a carefully crafted piece of work. What is he trying to tell us? I think he is saying that we need to clearly see Jesus and his work on earth, to understand our own place and the work that we need to do for God's will to be done on earth (as it is in heaven).

If we misunderstand Jesus and his work, we also misunderstand the work we have to do to usher in his kingdom. In fact we can misunderstand our place so badly that we could be in danger of doing Satan's work whilst in our misguided belief that we are doing God's will. Look at Mk 8: 31. When Jesus tells of his death for the first time to his disciples, we are told Peter rebuked Jesus for talking that way. In turn, Jesus rebuked Peter by calling him Satan! He told Peter: Get behind me Satan! This

same Peter also cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant when they came to arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Peter thought that his role as Jesus' disciple was to protect his Master who was coming to rule rather than to die.

When we misunderstand Jesus' work and purpose on earth, we start doing things thinking that we are actually helping God's cause when we are actually acting contrary to God's will. I am sure that Peter was sincere, but he was sincerely wrong! Do you know someone like that? Or better yet, have we asked God to search our own hearts to bring to light our Peter tendencies? Jesus tried to correct Peter's wrong notion of greatness by telling his disciples that to be his followers, we must be prepared to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow His example.

Similarly in Mk 9: 30, the disciples thought that following Jesus meant being first, getting honour. Again Jesus corrected them by this saying: If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all. In our reading of Mk 10:35 today, this misunderstanding even led to a request of James and John to get Jesus to put them in a high ruling position in Jesus' government. Imagine this: James and John were part of the inner circle of Jesus. They were 2 of the 3 select disciples whom Jesus brought with him to the Mount of Transfiguration. They were so close to him yet completely misunderstood what Jesus came to do and therefore also what they should have been doing.

We know from the Gospel according to Matthew that they brought their mother with them to make this request of Jesus. Some identify her to be the sister of Mary, which makes her Jesus' aunt. So they are playing the close family card too - alright

Jesus, let's keep all these power positions within the family. Look at the audacity in their request: Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask (v.35) And so for the third time, Jesus taught them that whoever wants to be great, must be a servant. Jesus must have sensed the urgency of getting this message across for he was about to enter Jerusalem to be crucified. Jesus is about to leave the leadership of his church in the hands of these people who still have got no idea what it means to be leading His people. It is crucial that they know what it entails. And it's crucial that we, all of us as leaders, know what that entails.

So Jesus asks James and John (v.38): "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?" This cup is a reference back to the Old Testament. In Jeremiah 25, the cup is the cup of God's wrath of judgment. And from Rev 14:11 we know this is the eternal judgment of being cut off from God. The baptism is the baptism of suffering and death which Jesus himself references in Luke 12. James and John being happily ignorant of all these, answer that they can. Then Jesus answers them affirming that they will indeed be suffering for their faith. From church tradition, we are told that James was the first of the 12 disciples to be martyred, about 10 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. John, on the other end of the spectrum, lived beyond all the rest but was imprisoned and suffered on the Island of Patmos from where he wrote the Book of Revelation.

It is not as if the rest of the disciples were any better at this point. In v.41, when the ten heard about what James and John did, (what did they do?) they were indignant. What do you think? Do you think they were indignant because they thought James and John shouldn't have been so full of themselves? Or do you think

they were indignant because they thought: “Oh shucks! I should have got there first?” Well, I think this was more likely the case because I imagine that they all started bickering so much that Jesus had to call them together again (v.42) teach about the essence of great leadership and of following His example.

I call this the Upside-down economy of God. Upside-down because it is counter-intuitive to what the world teaches us. Upside-down because of how, many of our world leaders, and persons of authority behave contrary to God’s economy. The secret to greatness in leadership, Jesus tells us (v.43), is that whoever wants to become great, must be a servant. What’s interesting about the Greek word used here for “servant” is that it is also translated elsewhere as “to serve” and is also the same root word used when you see the phrase in the bible “to minister to others”. So when we say “this is our ministry” or “we help out in this or that ministry”, what we are actually saying (if we are to be faithful to that Greek word) is that we are serving and a servant to this group of people. So what Jesus is actually saying here is that true greatness in leadership doesn’t come from trampling over others, or using your position over someone. True greatness in leadership isn’t measured by the number of people serving you but rather by the number of people you serve.

What about ME Jesus? My needs? (And you thought you came to church today to hear Good News.) Hold your horses, I am going to give you one last piece of bad news from this passage before telling you the very very good news. Jesus proceeds to further narrow the definition of greatness. What does he say in v.44: whoever wants to be first, must be a SLAVE of all. The difference between a servant and a slave (I’m oversimplifying it here in the interest of time) is that the first gets some

sort of wages, the second gets nothing because he is the property of the person he is a slave to. We are not supposed to even expect any sort of repayment from those we serve.

How would this practically look like? Great leadership. Whether you are someone with a corner office or someone who mostly just sits in the corner, you can exercise greatness in leadership by serving others. In God's upside-down economy, the way to significance is not by climbing up, it's by going down. Do I like it? No. I like my corner office with walnut wood panelling and a shiny plate on my door with all my titles and achievements engraved on it for all the world to see (these days we don't need that shiny plate because we have LinkedIn for that). I like someone to be serving me my cappuccino, getting my secretary to buy me my lunch because I am just too busy to leave my desk to do it (we lawyers did that a lot to our secretaries I was back in Singapore). But this ISN'T God's way to greatness. Call me simple if you will, but He says it, and I believe it. Don't get me wrong, I am NOT saying "Do not aspire to higher positions of leadership". I AM saying: get there by exercising servanthood and humility on the way.

Greatness doesn't come from a single stroke of genius, or a sudden insight, or a flash of brilliant strategy, or one act of courage; greatness comes from the millions of single, little, sometimes insignificant decisions that we make on a daily basis, which lead us to that place of greatness.

What would an attitude of service and humility look like for you at work or school or at home? Do you need to stop using your power, authority, hierarchy, and

titles to lord over others, to show others that you are better, smarter, richer, or more powerful? It could be something as simple as checking our own tone of voice with those under our authority or using a kinder word on someone else.

What would our homes and marriages look like if spouses tried to outdo each other in **serving** each other instead of demanding things from each other?

What would our community, our church look like if we did the same here?

If going alone at this “servanthood leadership “ is difficult for you, why not gather together with your cell-group members and as a cell-group decide how together you can serve your community? And if you aren’t in a cell-group, then huddle together with other like-minded people with your same passion, and scheme together how you can do good and serve in your area of passion.

If anyone had difficulty imagining what that serving each other could look like, Jesus now points to himself as the model for us saying (v.45): for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life for many. The use of the title Son of Man refers all the way back to the Old Testament Book of Daniel where Daniel was given the vision of the Son of Man given everlasting dominion over all peoples, nations, and languages who will serve him (Dan 7:14).

Isn’t it really interesting that Jesus, knowing the full import of the title he uses for himself, instead of being served says he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. In our OT reading from Isaiah today, we are told what this suffering servant looks like: Jesus was a Lamb led to slaughter, he was pierced for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities. For what reason? So that by his wounds, we are healed. And here comes the very very good news: Jesus offered up himself as payment for all OUR wrongdoings. If payment for wrongdoing isn’t needed, then

there would be no justice to speak of. In the perfect solution between His love for us and the necessity of justice, He gave his life up in our place so that we are freed from the condemnation of sin and death. We are free to choose to serve Him and His purposes as our love response of gratitude for the repayment of a debt we could never have paid for on our own. We love because He first loved us.

Have you truly understood what Jesus came to do for you? And if you do, have you grasped the implications of following Him, following the model he has set for us? Just before Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane where he was arrested, he said this to his disciples: Love each other, AS I HAVE LOVED YOU. He has given us the blueprint for greatness and significance for this life through servanthood leadership, even unto death. The 12 disciples didn't understand that until after Jesus' crucifixion. Peter in the end understood Jesus' message of the cost of discipleship. For we see in 1 Peter 5:3, Peter using this same teaching in our Mk 10 passage to exhort the elders not to be lording over their flock.

How much pain and abuse could have been avoided over the history of the Church, if only we truly understood what that meant. Peter finally understood the cost of following Jesus. Church tradition records that Peter was crucified upside-down for his faith.

Is that going to be difficult? This servanthood leadership. By golly, yes. Is it going to cost us? Of course. But the promise is there in the bible: Humble yourselves before the Lord so that in time he may lift you up. That was so with Jesus and that will be so with us.



Are we going to fail in this servanthood leadership? Yes, over and over again. But each time we fail, we know we will receive grace from God (and hopefully also from people around us) to try again just like the disciples did. Jesus kept on explaining it to them until they finally did understand. And if we keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, and harness the help of the Holy Spirit in us to help us in our task, I know that this servanthood leadership is a possibility we can be living into, day by day.

Let me pray for all of us.

Father, if there be among us someone who hasn't experienced how deep and wide your love is for us in Christ Jesus, I pray that the Holy Spirit will come now and move their hearts and let them experience your love. And for those of us struggling with significance, I pray that we will find our significance not by what we do, but by whom we are known - by you the Lord who created us, knew us, and gave His life up for us. Help us in our journey towards servanthood leadership, wherever you have placed us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.