

Greatness redefined and demonstrated

Mark 10:32-45

Introduction

Last week we took a detour from our regular study in the book of Mark so that we could set up a bit the context for what we are going through, with this pandemic of Corona Virus. If you didn't have the chance to listen to that message yet, we have talked about Romans 8:28 and how God is ultimately in control and sovereign over this situation of uncertainty. As Christians, we shouldn't fear or panic, because we know that our eternity is secure in His hands. In the same time, we should be thoughtful and sensible to our fellow neighbors and during this time we should abide by the rules and regulations given by our authorities and be sensitive to the needs of the ones around us.

As we continue our journey through the Gospel of Mark, today I would like for us to read Mark 10:32-45 and prepare our hearts for the forthcoming Easter celebration. And I don't know about you, but everything I could think of for the last few days has been the Corona Virus and all the restrictions and actions that are taken in order to prevent the spread of this virus, **and my mind has not been too focus on the fact that we are in the season of preparation for Easter.**

By the way, I should also say that if you have been with us at Trinity for the last few weeks in our study of Mark, you might have picked up on the fact that we intentionally skipped over the first verses in chapter 10, and we did that because I was actually scheduled last Sunday and this one to address the topics presented there by Jesus, divorce and remarriage, but we made the decision to come back to this text when we are back together, Lord willing soon. We thought that "Today's trouble is enough for today" as Jesus said☺

So let's read this passage today and see how God's Word can encourage us and bring our hearts comfort and peace in the midst of very trying times. **Mark 10:32-45**

So in this text **Jesus is helping his disciples to redefine greatness and he exemplifies that for them through His own ministry.** There are couple of scenes though in this text and each one of these scenes could each be represented by a summarizing word: v. 32-34 "**Prediction**" of Jesus' death; "**Reaction**" of the apostles in v. 35-41; and "**Explanation**", 42-45.

So let's start with the "prediction."

1. The **prediction** of Jesus' death – v. 32-34. First of all, I want you to look with me at v. 32 and I want you observe the fact that Jesus is resolute in heading to Jerusalem. This is the last stretch of His earthly ministry and He knows what else is left to be done: the cross. And instead of going alongside His disciples, as He did in the past, Jesus goes before them, leading the way.

And the incredible thing is the fact that Jesus is Only One in this group of travelers who's aware of what indescribable anguish awaits Him there.

But **pause for a second with me** and try to picture Jesus in your mind. Behold, this lone figure out in front, fully aware and informed of what awaits Him in Jerusalem. You can see Him steadfast in heart, determined, setting the pace for His disciples, striding purposefully forward. And do you remember why is he heading to Jerusalem? To DIE!!!

Jesus is determined to keep this appointment made in eternity past. A horrible appointment, but nevertheless a CRUCIAL appointment.

And Mark tells us that **the ones who followed Him were afraid**. I think that the ones who followed Him and were afraid were the people who believed He was the Messiah but they weren't quite sure how this is going to go down once they arrive in Jerusalem. And that is because in their minds Jesus is on the way to take control over the reins of the country and will destroy all the enemies of Israel, including the Roman Empire. So most likely these people were nervous and weren't sure what's going to happen.

And, as always, Jesus picks up on what's going on with the disciples and takes them aside to remind them that He is not going to Jerusalem to physically take over the country, **on the contrary**. He will be delivered over to the Roman rulers to be mocked, spat on, flogged and killed. But after three days He will rise again.

Now even though Mark recorded in his gospel, at least couple of other times when Jesus predicted His passion, this specific one is the most detailed one. And Jesus makes reference of several key actions that will be taken against Him, and they are all fulfillments of divine prophecies. For example, Ps. 22:7 or Is. 50:6 or Is. 53, talk specifically about the things Jesus will endure: being mocked, spat on, flogged and killed. And they happened shortly after specifically in this order and in specific details.

Next, the reaction of the apostles:

2. The **reaction** – v. 35- 41 – What's interesting, but not surprising is that right after Jesus talks about suffering, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, also called the "sons of thunder", probably because of their outgoing nature, **were in total agreement with each other about their greatness and they come to Jesus to make sure that they make some seating reservations** as they are heading to Jerusalem.

The disciples apparently were capable of selective listening and heard only what they wanted to hear. They heard Jesus couple of times talking in the past about this, and his suffering, but in their minds, it might be that they think Jesus suffers of negative attitude or a low self-esteem. They were hoping that Jesus wouldn't be right and that they would all rule together.

Now the disciples had several other situations until this point, when they were talking about who is the greatest among them and **James and John wanted to settle this "who is the greatest" issue once and for all! With "humility" they thought that they were the greatest. And they wanted Jesus to acknowledge this fact by allowing them to sit at the right and left hand of God.**

As someone pointed out, "They were more interested to live in glory rather than suffering and shame, in honor rather than rejection, fundamentally consumed by the possibility of a great exultation and a crown but without any place for a cross." But they wanted their reservations in early for some good seats at his royal table. Jesus is talking about suffering, but they talk about status.

They were interested in books like "The best life now" and "Every day a Friday." They were interested in a gospel that offers only the upsides and not the downsides.

And think about the guts these two have: James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were just simple fishermen from Galilee, ask Jesus to serve them as they wished. Huh? Who did they think they are?

Even if they were the Emperor of the Roman Empire, at the end of the day they were talking with the King of the Universe.

Because of their experience together with Peter, on the transfiguration mountain they thought that they deserve this honor. But you can also observe that they leave Peter out because they didn't think that there is a place for him anywhere. When God takes us on the mountains of blessings, we might have the feeling that we deserve that experience and we deserve the blessings we have. **But we don't! The blessings we have are not because of how great we are but because of how merciful and gracious God is!**

As an author pointed out, “in this request, the prideful desires of these disciples' hearts are on full display. There's nothing subtle about their request. There're not asking for faith to endure His suffering. They are not asking for the privilege of supporting Him in and through His suffering. They want to be famous pure and simple. James and John have defined greatness as position and power, and they want the title. They want the respect, the acclaim, and the importance. In their pride-dominated hearts, Jesus is just a means to their end of personal exaltation.

We hear what you have been saying Jesus, about sacrifice and all that, but we want something different. And we think you should give it to us because we are soo great.

Matthew adds another interesting detail, in ch. 20:20-21. Listen to what he says: “Then the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus with her sons. She knelt respectfully to ask a favor. ²¹“What is your request?” he asked. She replied, “In your Kingdom, please let my two sons sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left.”

So, what I think happened was that James and John went and spoke to Jesus and they weren't very successful in convincing Jesus of their greatness, so they decided to bring a power player in: their mommy. **I think it's a bit funny to think that as great as John and James were, so much so that they were nicknamed the “sons of thunder,” most likely “because of their determination and boldness and strength”, they had to go to their “mommy,” to Mrs. Thunder (or Mrs. Lighting bolt) and ask her to intermedate this hard situation. She had to be quite a woman, if the “sons of Thunder” use her as their go to person to save their backs. So she goes and has a chat with the Rabbi Jesus, and tries to convince Jesus that her sons are royal material, but Jesus doesn't fall for it.**

And why doesn't Jesus respond positively to their request? He is giving them at least two reasons: 1) **they don't know what they are actually asking and what their request would entail;** and 2) **it's not Jesus' prerogative to decide who sits at His right hand, but it is God the Father's prerogative** (and this is a really neat thing to see how the Trinity operates: God the Father plans, God the Son executes, and God the Holy Spirit sustains).

- 1) Let's take quickly the first reason, in v. 38 “Jesus said to them, “you don't know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

Jesus first responds that the request itself is misguided. They do not understand the nature nor the gravity of Jesus' messianic role. Jesus' question “are you able to drink?” is actually rhetorical, meaning, “you cannot drink.” Though these two will take it as a real question and will answer in v.39.

But I don't want you to miss what Jesus is saying here about His suffering. He is comparing his suffering and death with two images: "drinking from a cup" and "baptism". Jesus will use the cup metaphor again in Gethsemane ("if it's your will, take this cup away from me") and this metaphor is often used in the OT as a reference to God's judgment. Psalm 75:8 says "For the LORD holds a cup in his hand that is full of foaming wine mixed with spices. He pours out the wine in judgment, and all the wicked must drink it, draining it to the dregs." Also Is. 51:17 "Wake up, wake up, O Jerusalem! You have drunk the cup of the LORD's fury, you have drunk the cup of terror, tipping out its last drops."

As applied to Jesus, the metaphor implies that Jesus is about to experience God's wrath as He is about to take our place on that cross.

Jesus also compares what He is about to experience with "baptism." I think he does that because He is about to be swept away by death and will be brought back to life after 3 days.

And it's interesting how both the cup and baptism have become the main two symbols for Christ's death, celebrated regularly by Christians all throughout the ages.

But going back to our text here, James and John immediately respond by saying "We are able to drink this cup and go through this "baptism"! They seem to be hearing Jesus' words as a call to greater commitment and so they express their willingness to suffer and die for him. They are likely thinking of the potential of martyrdom in the messianic war that is coming. And though their request for the best seats was misguided, they show some courage (and maybe some overzealous pride) in their willingness to answer Jesus' call to give up their lives for Him and His cause.

Jesus responds by affirming the cost of their commitment. Though they cannot drink Jesus' cup, they will indeed suffer and in their own way experience Jesus' "cup and baptism" sometime in their future.

But then Jesus states that granting such places of honor is not his prerogative, but "it is granted for those for whom it has been prepared," by God alone. We don't know on what basis God distributes rewards in heaven, but if we look at what Jesus shared elsewhere with his disciples, we could deduce the fact that it's not by merit but by humble submission to God that rank is determined in the kingdom. Specifically, in the previous chapter Jesus talked about the fact that the first will be last, and the lowliest and the ones who are servant hearted will be first and the greatest.

And if you think that this type of attitude was reserved only for James and John, think again. In v. 41 we are told that the other disciples were really offended by James and John's boldness. But if you read v. 41, Mark tells that the others somehow found out about James and John's request and they become "indignant." But they are not "indignant" or angry because of the insensitivity of the request of their two fellows, but because James and John have beaten them to the punch. This situation revealed their selfish ambitions and their self-righteousness.

Now it's easy for us to disdain the disciples and point the finger at them, but let's be honest and admit that we can see ourselves in this picture. The disciples argued on the road about who was the greatest and even though maybe we might not openly argue about this, don't we engage in this type of debate in our private thoughts on a regular basis? If you're like me, you compare yourself to others and look for opportunities to claim greater importance than them, just as the

disciples did. Actually, for some of us, this sin of jealousy and insecurity is so engrained in us that we don't even realize we do this. We hear someone sharing a story or talking about an idea or a topic and immediately we are trying to find something in our own experience that would match and exceed if possible, the one we are just hearing. Why is that? Because we don't want to feel inferior or think that we are less than a specific person.

But in God's grace, Jesus doesn't leave His disciples there and He goes on to explain to them why they are all missing the point and why they need Jesus' death and resurrection.

3. The **explanation** – v. 42-45 – Can you sense the Savior's patience with them, as well as His loving commitment to teach them what they so desperately need to learn? He reminds them first of what they've all observed during the long years of Roman occupation: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority them." Then the Savior sets down a contrast: "But it shall not be so among you."

And what I find interesting as someone pointed out, is that next Jesus doesn't categorically criticize or forbid the desire and ambition to be great. Instead, He clearly redirects that ambition, redefines it, and purifies it. Hear v. 43 and 44 "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all."

We always want to pay careful attention when that word "must" appears in Scripture.

This word points us to something that's required, something that's indispensable. "You want to be great?" Jesus is saying. "Well, here's what has to happen. What's required is that you become a servant to others; it means nothing less than becoming the slave of everyone."

Remember who is the One making this statement: He is the ultimate example of true greatness. And this is exactly what Jesus goes on to make clear in v. 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."

In his excellent commentary on this passage, William Lane notes that Jesus is referring to "the reversal of all human ideas of greatness and rank." In other words, in this passage we are witnessing a profound and historic reversal of greatness and rank, one that has to occur in each of our lives if we're to have any possibility of becoming truly great in God's eyes. It means turning upside down our entrenched, worldly ideas on the definition of greatness.

And the difference couldn't be more stark, because our culture defines greatness as totally different than how the Bible defines greatness. **We are encouraged by our culture to pursue our self-interests and self-indulge, because we deserve it; we are told over and over again that we should pursue our selfish ambitions and when we don't feel that we want to do something or be committed to something or someone anymore, just move on because what really matters is you and your happiness. You are the center of your own world and as long as you are happy, that's all that matters.**

Contrast that with the pursuit of true greatness as biblically defined: serving others for the glory of God. And this is the genuine expression of humility, true greatness as the Savior defined it.

BUT I don't want you to miss an ESSENTIAL TRUTH, that actually makes all the difference in the world. It's what differentiates General work of philanthropy from Christian

service, what makes the difference between serving others motivated by our own ambitions and selfish desires, that most of the time we might not be aware of, and serving others selflessly, for the glory of God. AND THIS ESSENTIAL TRUTH IS that: TO LEARN TRUE HUMILITY, WE NEED MORE THAN A REDEFINITION OF GREATNESS AND EVEN MORE THAN JESUS' PERSONAL EXAMPLE OF HUMBLE SERVICE: WE NEED JESUS' DEATH AND HIS UNIQUE WORK OF SALVATION IN OUR BEHALF!

Listen again to v. 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.” The Savior here is clarifying for His disciples the difference between His example and theirs, and emphasizes the uniqueness of His own sacrifice. He’s telling them not only that true greatness is attained by emulating His example, but also that true greatness is not even possible for us apart from the Savior’s unique sacrifice. This is KEY Jesus alone came to give His life as a ransom for the sins of many – and this separates Him from any other sacrificial service that anyone else anywhere could ever offer. Here we find what is completely, utterly and categorically unique about the Savior and His example. And in true humility, OUR OWN SERVICE TO OTHERS IS ALWAYS BOTH AN EFFECT OF HIS UNIQUE SACRIFICE AND THE EVIDENCE OF IT. HIS SACRIFICE ALONE MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO ACHIEVE AND EXPERIENCE TRUE GREATNESS IN GOD’S EYES.

Donald English, a Bible commentator, expresses the point this way: “At the source of all Christian service in the world is the crucified and risen Lord who dies to liberate us into such service. That’s why all Christian service not only reflects the Savior’s example but should also remind us of His sacrifice. Ultimately our Christian service exists only to draw attention to this source – to our crucified and risen Lord who gave Himself as a ransom for us all.”

And that’s what happened later with James and John. THEY WERE TOTALLY TRANSFORMED AND LIBERATED FROM THEIR SIN OF SELFISHNESS ONCE JESUS DIED AND RESURRECTED AND BLEW HIS HOLY SPIRIT IN THEM.

Listen to Acts 12:1-2 “About that time King Herod Agrippa^[a] began to persecute some believers in the church. ² He had the apostle James (John’s brother) killed with a sword.”

After Christ’s resurrection and ascension, James was the first of the apostles to be martyred. He was ready to give His life for His savior and for the rest of the apostles. So what happened between Mark 10 and Acts 12? Jesus Christ gave Himself as a ransom for His people and that totally transformed the lives of these apostles and their pursuits and their desires.

John, his brother, had a similar experience. Even though John apparently was the last of all the apostles to die, he suffered persecution and was banished to the island of Patmos. But it’s obvious from the letters John wrote that he understood His Savior’s teaching on humble servanthood.

Listen to what John wrote later in his life: 1 John 3:16 “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” **WOW!! Did you hear that?** John is saying that true greatness and true love is to lay down our lives for the brothers!!

SO what happened in this time between Mark 10 and the writings of John’s epistles? THE SAVIOR HAD DIED AS A RANSOM!

The James and John we see back in Mark 10 were emphatically not laying down their lives for others, but they would be wholly transformed. And the explanation for this

transformation wasn't just our Lord's example but our Lord's sacrifice. His sacrifice was a ransom for sin, and its effect was a liberation for James and John from their selfishness and patterns of pride.

Here are two men transformed into humble servants of the gospel and servants of the church by the Savior's sacrifice. Two men who ended their lives truly great in the eyes of God. Why and how? V. 45 "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

4. **Applications** – and this leads me to my application of this message today:
- **If you are a Christian, consider your own life for just a moment. Where would you be today if Jesus hadn't ransomed you and liberated you of sin?** I'll tell you where: you would be self-sufficient, seeking to cultivate self-confidence for the purpose of self-glorification. But what happened to you? If you've been genuinely converted, you've been forgiven and transformed. And though for now there remains in you a temptation and tendency to sin, a fundamental and radical change has occurred in you so that you have the desire to serve others and to see God glorified. We have the inner call to lay down our lives for one another because He laid down His life for us!
 - **also, as a Christian, we are called to lay down our lives for our fellow believers and EVEN OUR ENEMIES.** In times like these we need to be thoughtful of others and find ways to bless them and serve them! And we should do this not because we have anything to gain from it or because we want to make a good impression with God, but we do this because Jesus has given His life for us and transformed us!
 - **if you are not a Christian and you hear this message** – God invites you to come to Him and reconcile with Him. You see, the Bible says that all of us have sinned and fall short from God's design and plan for us. You might have heard about the apostles and you might have thought, good for them that they are go grabbers, or they are self-determined. If you think this way, you might have missed the point of the sermon. Jesus makes a point in saying that His design for our lives as human beings is different than our plans for ourselves. He designed us to take care of the creation and of one another. Sadly, we are selfish and sinful. And He will judge one day for these things and He will punish us severely. Your only hope for escaping that judgment of God is to believe in Jesus Christ and repent of your selfishness and sinfulness. When you do that, the Bible says that you are forgiven and that you will be transformed. Come to Christ.

Let's pray: Father, thank you for reminding us that Jesus has taken care of our greatest need, our sin. Because of this, we don't fear today or tomorrow, knowing that if you have taken care of our sin, you will take care of everything else. And Lord, even if death would touch us, we know that our eternity is secure with you. So please let your peace overflow in our hearts.

Meanwhile, help us to serve our fellow brothers and sisters here locally and throughout the world to the best of our abilities. Help us to love and serve our neighbors selflessly. Give us wisdom to find out how that looks like. Maybe a phone call, or a quick check-in, or a run to the local store, or help financially or a prayer and a word of encouragement. Help us to live like Christ, in whose name we pray... As Lisa continues to play, please take few moments to think about what you heard...