

Greatness through Service

Mark 10:32-45

Covenant Waterfall, 24 January 2021

Read

Pray

Introduction

There's a yearning in most of us to be led by great leaders – whether in the workplace, or in our country – people of integrity, honour; people who have a sense of compassion and fairness, who desire to put the people first, instead of themselves.

Tragedy is that leaders who embody these virtues are few and far between – in history and still today. Yet we still yearn for a great leader. Especially so as South Africans. Experience the rule of one president – get our expectations high, think this guy is going to fix things up, lead well, help the people – and then expectations are dashed – ends up being corrupt, lording it over, feeding his own stomach instead of helping the people, and uses his leadership role to pursue his own selfish ambition. He goes, another one comes, think that *this* guy is going to be different, yet he ends up being even worse.

Why is this typically the case? Why is the bent of leadership in the world towards selfish ambition – usually in turn leads to tyranny, domination and oppression? Deep-seated sinfulness that has entered mankind from the fall. Reality – these tendencies have infected not only those leaders above us, “those other people” – but us too! Left to ourselves, our natural bent is to look after number one above all, and advance our own interests over others.

In our passage this morning, Jesus confronts his disciples with this very issue. He exposes the sinfulness of their selfish ambitions for power, status, greatness and self-importance and instead demonstrates true greatness – through service. What we'll see is that because Jesus gave up his life to serve us, our only response can be to serve others as his disciples.

- Called to suffer, vv.32-34
- Call for glory, vv. 35-40
- Called to serve, vv.41-45

A. Called to suffer, vv.32-34

³² And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ saying, “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.”

Let’s remind ourselves of the context here. Last week we saw, in the passage directly preceding this one, that Jesus taught that the first shall be last, and the last first. This point was vividly illustrated by the little children on the one hand, and the rich young ruler on the other hand.

Carrying on directly from this, Jesus begins to explain – prophesy - to his disciples what awaits him – his purpose for coming to earth, his messianic mission. In verse 33 we see that he tells them that the Son of Man will be delivered up to death. He will endure humiliation – he will be mocked, spat upon, flogged and killed. And on the third day he will rise from the dead.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because this is the third time Jesus had made such a statement to his disciples on what awaits him. He did it first in 8:31, then secondly in 9:31. This third time is the most detailed explanation out of all of them.

The nature of Jesus’ prophecy about his own future here, is that it is drawn from at least three previous prophecies made 750 to 1000 years before his incarnation. The prophet Isaiah prophesied specific details about Jesus’ death – that he would be derided and spat at (50:6), that he would be despised and crushed for our iniquities, that the punishment that

he endured would bring us peace (53:3, 5). King David also prophesied in Psalm 22:7 that the Messiah would be mocked and ridiculed.

Jesus quotes these OT prophecies about himself showing his disciples what he had come to earth to do: to serve, to suffer, to lay down his life.

B. Call for glory, vv. 35-40

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.”

The contrast between what Jesus has just explained about his calling – that he must be mocked and endure a humiliating death - and what his disciples, James and John ask him – senior positions in his kingdom, is shocking, it’s jarring.

How, why, did they make such a jump? In verse 33, Jesus began his prophecy by referring to a title that he has often used to describe himself, “the Son of Man”. It’s this title that got James and John excited. The Son of Man was another title for the promised Messiah of Israel, who as the prophet Daniel prophesied in chapter 7:13-14 – would come down on the clouds of heaven, with the Ancient of Days, to be (v.14) **“given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”**

Immediately, James and John’s minds would have jumped to this glorious messianic vision of the Son of Man ruling in all his power, might and splendour, over an everlasting kingdom encompassing all nations and tribes and tongues. Correctly, they had connected the dots that Jesus was this promised Son of Man. And so given this incredibly powerful and glorious messianic kingdom that they knew the Son of Man – Jesus – was to usher in, they wanted first dibs on the positions of power.

While Jesus carried on talking about the suffering and death he must endure, they had stopped listening. Only concerned about their ambitions for power. Their arrogance and

sense of entitlement come through so strongly in how they ask Jesus – v.35, **we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.** “we demand...” And their actual request, v.37 - **Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.**” reveals the extent of power they desired. Right and left hand of Jesus? They wanted to be Jesus’ deputies – second in command!

What does their request reveal? They wanted the benefits – the power and glory - of the coming messianic kingdom. But they weren’t too keen on the cost. It can be easy for us to judge James and John here. Yet we tend towards the same sinful thinking. I think most of us find status, self-importance, glory and power, “living your best life now”, far more exciting than “mundane” things like serving others humbly. That tends not to come naturally to us.

Jesus responds to them in verse 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?”**

What does Jesus mean here – the cup that he will drink and the baptism with which he will be baptised? Both the cup and baptism – reference to God’s wrath and judgement.

Jeremiah 25:15 talks about the “cup of the wine of wrath”, which Revelation 14:10 calls the “wine of God’s wrath.” Baptism is also a sign of God’s judgement and deliverance – pointing to the drowning of sin and redemption into new life (1 Peter 3:20-21).

So what is Jesus saying in his answer to James and John? “You guys don’t know what you’re asking for!” They want great positions, but they can’t do what Jesus is about to do. Jesus’ unique messianic calling is to take upon himself the wrath and judgement of God – drink the cup of God’s wrath and be baptised under God’s judgement on behalf of sinful man. Only Jesus will do this!

They respond confidently in verse 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,**

After confidently claiming they are able to drink Jesus’ cup and be baptised with his baptism, Jesus turns it around and says – indeed they will. But not in the same way as he

will. Only he will drink of God's wrath and be baptised under God's judgement on the cross. Only Jesus will suffer and die on the cross and atone for sins.

James and John – while they won't die on the cross for the sins of man, Jesus promises them here that they will share in his sufferings for his sake. If we look forward in biblical history, we see that indeed they do. In Acts 12, James is executed by King Herod. In Revelation 1:9 we see that John was enduring imprisonment and persecution **“on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”**

Beware the various shades of Christianity that offer health and wealth and happiness, “live your best life now” and teach that it is always God's will be bless and prosper you. You're being sold a lie and a poor imitation for the real deal. There will always a cost to true discipleship. For us, it most probably won't be imprisonment or martyrdom. Yet the Lord promises to lead us through challenging circumstances and suffering, and chooses to use these things to sanctify us, work good in us and make us increasingly dependent on him.

Verse 40 continues, Jesus speaking: **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 finally responds to James and John's actual request to sit at his left and right hand. He tells them that it's not up to him to grant those positions. In Matthew's version of this account (20:23) Jesus adds that it's only his Father who decides this. It's not up to the Son, or anyone else to know – it's concealed in the hidden purposes of God.

The point here is that our heavenly rewards cannot be earned by loyalty, faithfulness or good works. They are given sovereignly by God according to his good pleasure. James and John assumed they'd get an important position in the kingdom because of their closeness and dedication to Christ (remember they were his inner circle, with Peter). But all that counts for nothing – we don't follow Christ in order to receive a reward – missing the point. It's completely up to God who and how he chooses to reward his servants. We follow Christ for Christ's sake – and nothing else.

C. Called to serve, vv.41-45

v. 41, “And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.”

The rest of the disciples have been observing James and John interact with Jesus, and verse 41 tells us their reaction to it all – they are indignant at James and John. They're angry with them! Why? Not because they see how selfish they are being, but because they see that they've been beaten to the post. They've asked Jesus for the big positions in the kingdom. They're jealous! How do we know this? Jesus' response in the following verse:

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. Jesus addresses all of his disciples, not just James and John – showing that all of them were gunning for positions and power. Here Jesus contrasts worldly leadership with that of his kingdom.

Verse 42 – Gentiles (world) – “lord it over” – engage in domination, an uncontrolled exploitation of power. They use their power and status in order to dominate others. Embodied in “strong man” leadership which seeks to control, oppress and ends up in tyranny. This is the natural, sinful bent of the world.

We are seeing this vividly in political leadership across the world today. Exacerbated by the Corona virus crisis. Governments are becoming increasingly top-heavy, and becoming more oppressive and tyrannous by deliberately curtailing our freedoms through things such as lockdowns. Curtailing freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom to openly practice our religion. Being carried out in heavy-handed, oppressive ways. Cannot question “big brother” any more, must just conform without questioning the status quo.

Verse 43 – Jesus says, 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.”**

Not so with you! Don't imitate the heavy-handed, domineering ways of the world. If you want to be great, you must serve. If you want to be first, you must be the slave of all. Greatness in the kingdom of God is not achieved by worldly ambition, the exercise of power, strength and domination. Instead greatness comes in a way that is counter-intuitive to human nature: in serving others. Become the least, become a slave. Slave (doulos) =

someone with no status, entitled to nothing, no pay, no luxuries, entire life is lived for the sake of others.

Why is this the case? This is how the greatest man, Jesus, lived - the greatest leader of all time. As God himself, he willingly left the glories of heaven, took the form of a servant and humbled himself to the point of death (paraphrase Philippians 2:7-8). God himself took on flesh in Christ – the eternal Creator – Lord of heaven and earth. He didn't come to us to dominate and oppress us. He came, as verse 45 says, **“not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

Jesus gave his life as a ransom for us. A ransom? Greco-Roman term - a payment to secure the release of a slave – redemption. Jesus came to pay our debts. What are our debts? On our own, we're enemies of God. We've sinned against him by living lives that are self-centred, self-glorifying and self-gratifying, instead of living for his glory and being gratified in him. Because of our sins – deserving of death and God's judgement.

But because God so loved the world – he sent his Son to serve us by taking upon the punishment that was meant for us, upon himself. Isaiah 53:6, **“the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** Jesus paid our ransom – he paid with his life – he died on the cross in our place, and then because death had no hold over him, he rose on the third day. Result? Those who trust in him have been released from that debt we once owed, our sins have been forgiven!

Brothers, sisters, friends – repent of your selfish ambition and desire for position and worldly glory – road leads to hell. Instead receive this free gift of grace from Jesus by faith! That he served you to the point of dying in your place. Receive his forgiveness of your sins, the privileges and blessings of knowing your heavenly Father and the assurance of eternal life. And because he has served you and continues to serve you so generously, by God's grace, empowered by his Spirit – serve others in Christ, living selflessly for his glory.

Amen

