

Sermon Summary #30

The Radical Call to Serve Others as Jesus Serves You
Mark 10:32-45

Thinking about the importance of context . . .

As I look at this incident and put it together with so many others like it, it becomes ever more clear to me that **the biggest problem facing the disciples wasn't theological ignorance but rather pride and self-promotion.** The most imposing obstacle they had to jump over in following Jesus wasn't so much figuring out who he was as it was resisting the temptation to ask, "What's in it for me?" These men repeatedly failed to understand what Jesus said about himself and his mission because **they were blinded by their own self-seeking, self-serving, self-aggrandizing ambition.** This incident in Mark 10 isn't the first time the disciples got tripped up over their own pride and arrogance. See **Mark 9:33-34** . . .

Can you imagine **how distressing and upsetting this must have been to Jesus?** Don't think for a moment that he was indifferent to their ambition. Here he is trying to minister to the needy and downcast and disabled, and the very men he has called to be at his side are getting into arguments about who is greater in the kingdom! Perhaps it went something like this . . .

So, as if to top it all off, Mark tells us here about an incident where the two brothers, James and John, come to Jesus and make what strikes us all as an absolutely outrageous request. In Matthew's version of the story (20:20-21) they enlisted their mother in the discussion and put her up to making the request.

It's more than a little fascinating that **Peter is nowhere found in this encounter.** After all, it was Peter, James, and John who constituted the "inner circle" and had accompanied Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration. Maybe the two brothers thought their chances were better without Peter being included. **After all, there were only two places of prestige and power: on the right and on the left, and they'd just as soon make this a family affair and not have to include their friend.** Or perhaps they were afraid Peter would blow it by sticking his foot in his mouth yet again. In any case, he's left out this time.

But I think there's an even more obvious reason why Peter isn't included. It is found in **the identity of the mother of James and John.** Who was she? She was the wife of a man named Zebedee. Other texts tell us her name was Salome. Now here's the important part: **she was the sister of Mary,** the mother of Jesus. In other words, **this woman was Jesus' aunt. Therefore, James and John were his cousins!**

I think these two guys left out Peter and brought along their mother in an attempt to **capitalize on their blood ties with Jesus.** Can't you just hear them: **"Hey Jesus, cuz, what you say we keep all this power and glory in the family?"** They were undoubtedly playing on Jesus' affection for his mother by having her sister join them in making this request. They may have been proud and self-seeking, but they weren't stupid!

The form of the question shows us just how **conniving** they were. See **Mark 10:35** . . . They approach him much the way our children come to us, asking for favors. They first try to manipulate us into making a promise, perhaps catching us off guard where we casually say, "Sure, what can I do for you?" In other words, **promise us up front that you'll do what we ask, and only then will we make our request!** And what exactly do they want? See v. 37 . . .

The "right" hand and the "left" hand were proverbial in the ancient world for proximity to the King or the Prince or the Emperor. Whoever sat there had unmediated access to his power and would enjoy the privileges of royalty. The place of first honor was on the king's right; the place of second on his left. Perhaps thinking that Jesus will soon wear his crown without having first to go to the cross, they ask him for this privilege ahead of the others.

Clearly they were **ignorant of the implications** of what they were asking (see v. 38). What they didn't realize is that to ask that they might reign with him is to ask to suffer with him first. But how could they understand suffering *with* Jesus when they as yet don't even understand the suffering *of* Jesus?

The **"cup"** to which Jesus refers most often represents or symbolizes judgment and retribution and extreme suffering. See Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17; Mark 14. I should also point out that in using the term "baptism" here Jesus is not talking about literal water baptism. He is using the word "baptism" in its most literal sense of being "immersed" in something. So he asks them: "Do you realize that I'm going to be *soaked in suffering*? I'm going to be *immersed and engulfed in indescribable suffering.* Are you prepared to join me in that experience?"

Now, of course, there is a sense in which **all believers share in the sufferings of Jesus.** We don't suffer in a redemptive sense. Our sufferings are not to atone for sin. They don't satisfy the wrath of God. But we are all called upon to endure the sin and anger of an unbelieving world and to endure rejection and persecution by those who hate the gospel. In fact, **both James and John** suffer grievously because of their faith. James was the first of the apostles to suffer as a martyr (Acts 12:1-2), and John would be exiled on the island of Patmos during the persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian (Rev. 1:9).

Now, you know that the other 10 disciples, including Peter, were eavesdropping on this conversation. Their reaction is expected: see v. 41 . . . This is certainly **not** righteous indignation. Don't think for a moment that their indignation was something along the lines of: "I can't believe that you would dare to insult our Lord this way! What got into you two anyway? For heaven's sake, show a little sensitivity to Jesus. He just told us how badly he's going to suffer and all you two can think of is your own personal prestige and power in the coming kingdom."

No, not for a minute. Their anger and indignation springs from **their own jealous desire** to have precisely what James and John have asked for. They're mad because the two brothers beat them to the punch! They're mad because they're afraid that if these two get the prime seats next to Jesus, they'll be left out! That we know for certain their protest was not a humble concern for Jesus, but was in fact an expression of their own pride and ambition, is seen in **vv. 42-44** where **Jesus speaks to them all** and makes his point about being a servant of others.

He does this by appealing to what was all too familiar to the people of his day: **the brutal tyranny among the many Gentile princes and lords and petty rulers of the ancient world,** perhaps especially the kings and governors of Rome. They ruled by intimidation and fear. Jesus couldn't have been any clearer: "Guys, take a good and painful look at yourselves. In all your jockeying for position in the kingdom, in your struggle to get ahead of each other, you are acting just like the pagan rulers of the kingdoms of this world!"

"In the kingdom of God," says Jesus, "we operate on an entirely different value system. We define greatness in altogether different terms. Greatness in the kingdom has nothing to do with power or authority or being over someone else or being in a position where others wait hand and foot on you. Greatness is measured by humble, selfless service."

According to the world, both then and now, greatness is like a **pyramid** – the prestige and power of a great person are built on top of others, most often at their expense and to their detriment. The "great" person sits atop the pyramid and all those below him do his bidding. But in the kingdom of God, says Jesus, **the pyramid is inverted!** Greatness is seen when a person happily and humbly yields to others and sincerely acknowledges their importance and quietly serves their needs.

Our Lord's concluding declaration in v. 45 is nothing short of stunning. Let's reflect on this . . .

God doesn't need you and me. He lacks nothing. There isn't anything we can give him or do for him that he doesn't already have by virtue of the fact that he is God. We cannot serve him as if he were needy, give to him as if he were lacking, supply him as if he were depleted, support him as if he were dependent, empower him as if he were weak, inform him as if he were ignorant, or heal him as if he were wounded.

Invariably, the person who serves is the one who is magnified. The person who serves is put on display as being generous or kind or strong or resourceful. The person who is served is revealed as weak or deficient or depleted or in distress. Thus **anything you propose to "serve" God you dishonor him.** To come to God as if he were needy and lacking and your service was designed to bolster him and provide for him and supply what he lacks **is to draw attention to yourself.** Far from glorifying God, serving God in this way demeans and dishonors and detracts from his glory.

But aren't we the 'servants' of God (Rom. 1:1)? Are we not repeatedly in Scripture commanded to 'serve' him (Rom. 12:11; 16:18)? So, how can you say that 'serving' God is evil and dishonoring to God?"

First of all, we are rightly called God's "servants" or "bondslaves" because **he owns us:** we "have been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20), the blood of Christ. We belong to Him. **Second,** we are rightly called God's "servants" insofar as we submit to his authority and acknowledge his right to tell us to do whatever he pleases.

What I'm saying, rather, and this comes from John Piper, is that the radical call to commitment and obedience to everything commanded in Scripture is not something we do for him, but things he enables us to do for others. The reason we may confidently sacrifice ourselves in the service of others is because Jesus will sacrifice himself in serving us. He has promised to serve me by sustaining my will as I risk loving those who may not love back. There is nothing to which he calls me that he does not gladly and with unwavering consistency promise to provide that I may fulfill.

So, yes, serve God, but not because you believe your service supplies God with what he otherwise lacks. Or, to use Paul's words in Acts 17:24-25, "God is not served **as though he needed anything.**" If the motivation for your service is your belief that God is needy and dependent then you dishonor him. But if your service is grounded in your confidence that whatever you do or offer him is simply returning what he has already given you or done in and through you, you honor him. God can't be served because he has no deficiencies that need to be replenished. Instead we have the deficiencies and he is infinite in wisdom and power and readiness to serve us. **He has the resources. We have the needs, not vice versa.** In other words, by all means serve God, **but always as the one who receives, not as the one who gives.**

Now come back to v. 45 and try to envision the reaction of his disciples as they heard this. Here Jesus makes a claim that is nowhere to be found on the lips of any other religious leader or teacher. **"I didn't come to the earth so that you could serve Me! I came so that I might serve you."**

There it is again: Jesus did not come looking for people to work for him. He came to work for us. He came to serve us. **Jesus didn't come to recruit you to meet God's needs.** God has no needs. **Jesus**

came to bring you the resources of God to meet your needs. He died to meet your needs. He rose to meet your needs. He reigns to meet your needs, and make you happy in him forever.

God is our servant in the sense that he uses all his divine resources to help us and strengthen us and support us and provide our needs as we obey his command to serve others. See especially Luke 12:35-37 . . . Here we see that the "master" insists on serving even in the age to come when he will gloriously appear "with his mighty angels in flaming fire" (2 Thess. 1:7).

In our misguided zeal, we say: "Oh, God, what can I do for you?" To which God replies: "No, no. You've got it backwards. The question is, 'What can I do for you?' *You* don't strongly support me. I'm God! I strongly support you." We must never forget that **God is always the Giver and we are always the recipients.**

The Giver gets the glory. So all serving that honors God must be a receiving. To be sure, let us work hard; but never let us forget that it is not we, but the grace of God which is with us (1 Corinthians 15 :10) . Let us obey now, as always, but never forget that it is God who works in us, both to will and to do his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). See also Romans 15:18; Hebrews 13:20-21.

Biblical texts such as this are what lead me to conclude that the radical call to self-sacrificing discipleship and holiness of life is **not** fundamentally a call to serve Jesus. It is a call to *be served by Jesus* so that we may then serve others. We honor God, not by pretending to give him what we arrogantly think he needs, but by praying for and posturing ourselves to receive all that he is and has obtained for us in Jesus.

And how or in what way does Jesus serve us? What is the preeminent expression of his serving us? See v. 45 . . . in giving his life as a ransom in our place so that we might be set free!

Two words are crucial:

- (1) "ransom" –
- (2) "for" –

Consider **Galatians 3:10-13** and the "sword of Damocles" as told by Cicero

Jesus did not serve us by giving us an example of how to die well. Jesus was not merely throwing us a bit of assistance, as one who throws a rope to a drowning swimmer. He did not die as a martyr to inspire us to love one another. He died as our substitute to endure and satisfy the wrath of God that we deserved and in doing so paid our ransom and set us free from the guilty and penalty of sin!

How does one develop or cultivate a spirit of service? How does one become a slave of others? We are so selfish, so absorbed with our own welfare and comfort and reputation that we can barely see beyond the end of our own noses, much less see people in need and lovingly and joyfully give our time and very selves to them. So how do we approach serving others?

- (1) You must train yourself so that the last thing that comes to mind as you consider serving another is **personal entitlement**.
- (2) **Personal convenience** must never factor into your decision about whether or not to serve or help or encourage others.
- (3) You have to look on those you serve **not to see what they've done or failed to do for you** but only in terms of what Christ has done for them and what he wants to continue to do in them.

"But I'm still so self-centered and concerned with preserving my schedule and holding on to my stuff and watching out for number one. How do I get beyond that? How do I overcome the instinctive tendency to think only of me?"

The answer to this question isn't found in my providing you with a **list of tasks** that you can do. No, **the problem isn't that you lack a list of way concrete ways to serve others. The problem is that we are consumed with self!** So how do we begin to experience a breakthrough and get beyond our "selves" and learn to enjoy serving others?

You must have a clear and deep conviction in your heart about what Jesus did in serving you by giving himself as a ransom to set you free from sin and death. In other words, the only thing that will turn your heart away from an obsession with yourself, the only thing that will loosen the grip on your heart of entitlement and a concern for personal convenience, is an ever-growing, ever-deepening, ever-expanding understanding of what Jesus did for you on the cross and why it was necessary that he do it. You will never overcome the feeling of entitlement or conquer the allure of personal convenience until there has taken root in your heart the clear and unmistakable conviction that the only thing of which you are truly deserving is hell.

In other words, **the key to making vv. 43-44 a reality in your life is being swept away and immersed in and swallowed up by the truth of v. 45!**

And there is no better explanation of what v. 45 entails than what Jesus said earlier in **vv. 33-34**. You must live and breathe in the truth of vv. 33-34. Do you realize that this was for you? Do you realize that he did it in your place, although he didn't deserve it and you did? Do you realize that this is the only reason you have hope? Do you realize that this is the only reason you have heaven?

Once that realization begins to seep into your soul and take root in the depths of your heart and you find that you can hardly think of anything else, you will find joy and delight in becoming the servant and slave of others. Then and only then will you find the strength to serve others as Jesus serves you.