

The Making of a True Servant  
Mark 10:35-45

This is a scenario in the life of Jesus that ought to leave us both shaking our heads at the audacity of it, and looking deep within our selves to make sure we are not guilty of it.

James and John ambush Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. They are sneaky, indirect, and conniving. They come to Jesus as they are traveling with Him but they don't make their intention known outright. They want to control both the discussion and the outcome.

Perhaps you've encountered a similar strategy in your job, in a relationship, maybe with your children. I have had people over the years, people that I know have an ax to grind, call me say, "Pastor, I'd like to make an appointment with you." And I'll say, "Sure, what would you like to talk about." And they'll say something like, "Well, you'll find out when we get together."

It's a control strategy. It allows the person making the request to have the upper hand in the discussion. They make a request, which makes the issue personal, then prevent an early response by withholding the content of the request until a time of their choosing, usually when responding differently than the asker wants gets the other person in trouble.

This is one of those occasions. James and John come to Jesus, apart from the other disciples, on the road as they are making their way to Jesus, and they make a personal request by playing on His affection for them before telling Him what they actually want. The brothers come to Jesus and say, "Teacher, we want you do to for us whatever we ask of you." At this point, the content of their request is not in focus. First, they make their request personal: "we want you to do for us." This way, they attempt to force Jesus not to deal with the rightness or wrongness of their request but with His affection for them and relationship to them as Teacher/student.

Jesus seems to take the bait when He asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Now, I say, "Jesus seems to take the bait," because Jesus is neither fooled nor captivated by whatever motive moves these two disciples in this moment. Jesus knows their hearts. There is nothing hidden from Him. So, he knows full well what is happening here. One of the surprising elements of this interaction is that Jesus doesn't just come out say, "Okay, boys, what are you up to?" He could have pulled the rug out from under them at the very beginning, but He doesn't. He IS their Teacher and he has something to teach them even now.

Sometimes, disciples, Jesus leads us in our strategies to bring us where He wants us. He allows us to indulge our sinfulness and flesh so that when He rebukes or disciplines us, we will more greatly appreciate the patience and love He offers us. Sometimes, He will allow us to wallow in pride in order to humble us before the depth of His love and the majesty of His glory, knowing that when we see Him as He is we will be all the better for it.

At this point, the two brothers drop the bomb. They say to Jesus, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." There is so much in this request that boggles the mind. They are asking Jesus to exalt them above all the other disciples, and especially Peter. They are asking Jesus to make them like Joseph to Pharaoh, like Joshua to Moses, like Elisha to Elijah, like the Son to the Father. They are asking to be the two princes of the Kingdom above everyone else. They are asking just one degree less than what got Lucifer thrown out of heaven.

**Isaiah 14:12–14 (ESV) <sup>12</sup>"How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!  
How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! <sup>13</sup>You said in your**

*heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; <sup>14</sup>I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'*

- It is mind boggling that two of Jesus' closest, most beloved disciples would make such a request.
- It is mind boggling to see how close is this request to the words and intent of Lucifer.
- It is mind boggling to think that here, on His final approach to Jerusalem, the Devil is once again tempting Jesus, through these two weak and sinful disciples, to give him what he has always wanted.
- It is mind boggling to think that these two disciples would even ask such a question given what Jesus has just told them.

**Mark 10:32-34 (ESV)** <sup>32</sup> *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, <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."*

They ambush Jesus on the road to Jerusalem where, as He just told them, He will be arrested and tried and brutalized and killed and rise on the third day, and they want exalted royal positions when He comes into His glory.

Have they not been listening?

Do they think Jesus was just kidding about the betrayal, the condemnation, the mocking and humiliation and whipping and death?

Their question suggests either they truly don't understand what Jesus is telling them or they don't believe Him. Their question and the manner of their request suggests they think Jesus is just trying to keep His secret mission hidden, and that they think they have insider information that puts them in a better position than anyone else.

- It is mind boggling to think that this late in the game, given what Jesus has just told them to expect, they are still thinking in this proud, self-exalting way.
- Or that status in the kingdom can be bestowed as a favor or earned by loyalty or self-sacrifice, which is what Peter meant when he commented about the disciples' sacrifices earlier.

But let us be careful here. Many who have walked long with Jesus still find themselves battling the flesh, and sometimes not even realizing the war they are fighting. The apostle Paul wrote,

**Romans 7:22-23 (ESV)** <sup>22</sup> *For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*

And Peter, writing to Christians, to the elect exiles of the Dispersion, urged,

**1 Peter 2:11 (ESV)** *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.*

And that is why later in that same letter Peter instructs the believers to

**1 Peter 5:8-9 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup> *Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls*

*around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.<sup>9</sup> Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.*

Jesus responds to the brothers by referring them back to what He has already told all of them, then by reminding them that they are all subject to the Father's sovereign will.

**Mark 10:38 (ESV)** *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?"*

Not to be put off, the brothers answer that they believe themselves to be up to the task. To which Jesus says,

**Mark 10:39-40 (ESV)** *"The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized,<sup>40</sup> 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 tells them they will, in fact, experience the will of God and the power of God, and also the sovereignty of God.

- The will of God is for Christ to drink the cup of God's wrath as the Savior, advancing God's plan to fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord through his plan of salvation. The will of God is that His Son will offer His life on the cross as an atonement for sin and as the satisfaction of divine justice against sinners. They will experience the will of God both as sinners who are saved by grace through the sacrifice of Christ and as witnesses who will declare the truth of God's saving grace to a lost and dying world.
- The power of God is the power of the indwelling Spirit of God through Whom Christ lived a perfect, sinless, God-ordered life. It is the Spirit through Whose indwelling presence Jesus will have the grace to submit to death for the Father's glory.
  - The Spirit poured out on Christ at his baptism has been the power of every miracle, the confidence against every temptation, the wisdom in every teaching, the leader in every direction, the Counselor at every turn, and the Comforter in the night hours that Jesus spent in prayer and fellowship with the Father.
  - These disciples would one day, as all true disciples do, experience the power of God in the indwelling Spirit of God who enables them to live the life of faith and obedience that Jesus lived and calls us all to live.
- And the sovereignty of God they will experience as they joyfully submit to having their personal ambitions surrendered to God's eternal plan.
  - They will come to know the joy of resting in the plan of God, knowing that as He magnifies His glory in the world, God multiplies His children's delight in Himself.
  - The more we surrender to God's plan to glorify Himself in and through us, the more we experience Him as He truly is, the more we love Him for Who He truly is and the more we delight in Him as He truly is.

Yes, they will come to a place where they will not only accept but delight in the fact that it is the Father who prepares and runs the kingdom. We will all come to that place where we love and embrace the sovereignty of God, if we pursue the journey to know God as He purposes to be known.

Jesus in love and mercy, full of grace and truth, takes these two men to the Father, and gives them more than they were asking for, better than they could have imagined. Then the others show up and Jesus

extends the same grace to them. Look at what Jesus says to His disciples as they express their indignation at James and John, that they should try to outmaneuver the rest of the group. While Mark speaks of their indignation, Jesus' response suggests that the other ten are not so much upset that James and John would ask such a question as much as that the brothers beat them to it and left the rest of them out.

**Mark 10:42-45 (ESV)** <sup>42</sup> *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."* <sup>43</sup> *But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,* <sup>44</sup> *and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.* <sup>45</sup> *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Jesus is speaking to all of them, to their hearts and motives and minds and assumptions. "Lord it over" and "exercise authority" are key phrases here. This is the social structure of the natural, sinful, fallen world, the world the disciples live in and apparently think the kingdom of God will emulate. It is a world like ours where everybody is trying to exalt themselves at someone else's expense. Everybody trying to be the boss of somebody. Jesus makes one thing very, very clear: **self-exaltation has no place in the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom, service prevails.**

As we come to a close this morning, I want you to **think about the two word Jesus uses for service here, and then I want to give you some reasons to make these words of Jesus your personal motto.**

When Jesus says, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant," He uses the word *diakonos*. *Diakonos* means servant. It is the word from which we get our English word "deacon." This word is something of a heart word. It describes one who has a heart to serve. The word *doulos* means "slave." Where *diakonos* is a heart word, describing a motive of the heart, *doulos* is a will word, describing a conviction, a determination, a commitment of the will. A slave surrenders his will to the will of his/her master.

Jesus says, in the Kingdom, rather than using people to get what we want, we give our heart and our will, we spend ourselves helping others get what they need. We strive for the exaltation of others rather than the exaltation of self. We serve rather than demand service.

That service, by the way, begins with God. When Jesus is in the desert being tempted, after His baptism, the devil tempts Him with all the authority in the world. He takes Jesus up on a high mountain and shows Him the nations and offers Him immediate lordship over them all, if only Jesus will fall down and worship Him. Jesus' reply to the temptation to self-exaltation is wrapped in the language of service:

**Matthew 4:10 (ESV)** *Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"*

All service in the Kingdom of God is directed first and foremost toward the Person of God for the glory of God. We serve one another from the overflowing of serving God.

But let me attempt to answer a more immediate question: "Why should I serve the Lord and serve others for the Lord?" "Why should I make serving the motive of my heart and the focus of my will?"

Three reasons: **first, because Jesus set us an example in His life and death that He intends His disciples to follow.** Listen to the words Jesus uses here:

**Mark 10:45 (ESV) *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.***

You might not recognize something the twelve disciples would not have missed. When Jesus calls Himself the “Son of Man,” they very likely would have thought immediately of Daniel’s vision of the Son of man in Daniel 7:13-14,

**Daniel 7:13-14 (ESV) <sup>13</sup> *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. <sup>14</sup> And to him was 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.***

The Son of Man is a King with a divine, heavenly, universal, indestructible kingdom. He is one to be served by the peoples of the earth. Yet Jesus says even the Son of Man, who should be rightly and gloriously served, came not to be served but to serve. And His form of service is to give his life as a ransom for those who are not entitled to anything but their own death. He Who should be served serves those who should not otherwise be served and would not be served were it not for grace.

Surely, if Jesus came to serve, then His disciples ought also to be servants. Jesus makes this point again on the night He is betrayed when in the Upper Room He takes off His outer garment, kneels and washes these same disciples’ feet and says to them afterwards,

**John 13:15-17 (ESV) <sup>15</sup> *For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.***

Jesus set an example for His disciples that He expects us to follow.

**Second, we ought to make “servant” and “slave” words to live by because God Himself served up His Son on our behalf.**

**Romans 8:32 (ESV) *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?***

God did not spare His Son. God sent His Son. God gave His Son. God forsook His Son. God sacrificed His Son. God buried His Son. God raised His Son from the dead. God did this so that you might see that magnitude of His glory in the love He extends to you. God served you with the life and death of His Son, giving you, in and through Christ, access to mercy and grace you could never have deserved or earned for yourself, no matter how intensely you served.

You could not earn the sacrifice of Jesus through service, but you can delight in that sacrifice. You can honor that sacrifice. You can love that sacrifice through your service now. You cannot earn the gift of grace, but through your service you can express your gratitude for the gift you have been son freely given.

**Finally, you ought to make service the fundamental work of your life because those having received mercy, who do not serve mercy to others, may lose the mercy they have received, showing they never truly accepted mercy in the first place.**

**Matthew 18:23-35 (ESV)** <sup>23</sup> “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.

<sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

<sup>28</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

<sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.

<sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’

<sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

<sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

The message of the parable is simple. From your heart, treat your brothers and sisters who are also subjects of the King, as the King has treated you, with self-sacrificing mercy and the service of love. **The greatest failure in the church today is the failure of those who have received divine mercy to serve one another with that same mercy.** Our greatest shortcoming is to think that the grace that found us and ransomed us and saved us and redeemed us and renewed us and reconciled us, is, in the end, all about us. To think that what we have been given is ours alone and concerns no one else.

**God who has served us with infinite mercy expects us to serve mercifully one another.** We are not to be banks, great depositories of spiritual wealth. We are to be distribution centers with shelves ever needing to be refilled because what comes in of spiritual blessing we give out in humble, Christ-like service.

If you find you cannot do this, if you cannot genuinely, humbly serve the brothers and sisters around you, then you need to examine your heart today.

- It may be that you never actually received the mercy you claim.
  - It may be that you claim to be born again but are not.
  - It may be that your service to Christ is only lip-service, and you are really just serving yourself.
- If this is you, it is not too late. Call out to God for a new heart, a new will, a new love, a new life, and a new service.

Christ has set the example for us, and if we love Him, we will keep His command to follow His example. God spared not His own Son, spending Himself who needs nothing from us to give everything to us. Let us not risk losing what we have gained, but in the Spirit of God and love for Christ, serve God and one another, from our hearts, with our will, to the glory of God.