

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Mark 10:35-45
March 5, 2023

Who's Greatest?

Throughout the Bible there is a common tension woven between the first born in a family and their siblings. We've heard about Cain and Able, Esau and Jacob, David and his brothers. Traditionally the birthright, power, or blessing from the patriarch was passed down to the first born in the family. But in each of these stories, God flips this norm on its head.

Able's sacrifice was more pleasing to God than his older brother Cains.

Jacob stole the birthright from his older brother Esau.

Joseph was the favored son among all his older brothers.

And David was selected as king of God's people from among eight older brothers, all of who in the world's eyes were more powerful and capable than he.

But time and time again, God challenged this cultural notion that the first should intrinsically have the power in the family.

In today's scripture Jesus again turned this notion of power and prestige on its head. Apparently God looks at much different criteria than we do for passing down authority. It's not based on birthright, but on service.

Please join me as we read from Mark 10:35-45.

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

39 "We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, **40** but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. **42** Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **43** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of

all. **45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Now, I bet that if we were truly honest with one another, this scripture would be quite convicting for us all. I like being first. I like getting the best seat at a concert or the best parking spot at Costco. I like sitting in first class, though that rarely if ever happens. I like getting the nicest cut of meat.

I don't like being last. I don't like not getting my way. I like being served.

But apparently Jesus' kingdom works quite differently. That's what we are going to talk about today. There are three things in particular that I want to lift up from our scripture. First we'll look more at the sovereignty of God's purposes which we touched on previously. Then we'll address the upside down nature of God's kingdom. And finally, we will explore how Jesus' sacrifice was the ultimate form of service.

We talked a little bit a few weeks back about the sovereignty of God. Today we are going to take it bit further and talk about God's purposes. Sometimes things happen for which there are no rational human explanations, particularly when it comes to tragedy and suffering.

The truth is that sometimes we hurt grieving people trying to comfort them with empty words, and only end up making things worse.

We may say things like, “At least they aren't suffering any more.”

“God needed them in heaven more than we did.”

“There is another angel watching over us.”

My friends, please never, ever say these sort of platitudes to people who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Just simply say you are sorry for their loss and that you are praying for them. That's it. Any other sort of explanation robs God of his sovereignty and merely makes us look stupid.

As God spoke through the Prophet Isaiah saying, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”¹

Psalm 46 says, “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

So when God choses to do something that is outside the norm of typical human power structures, it's totally within his sovereign power and prerogative to do so. Like in our scripture story today when Jesus addressed this request from

¹ Isaiah 55:8-9

James and John to give them the number one and two spots in his coming kingdom.

One commentator wrote, “To be seated at the right hand of a ruler or host meant occupying a place of high honor. The place itself was considered an indicator of the power and authority of the one holding it.”²

Remember just prior to this, Jesus overheard his disciples arguing about which of them was the greatest. And Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first, must be the very last and the servant of all.” Then he took a little child, someone who was weak, with little to no power, or authority, and said, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Apparently James and John had already forgotten this lesson when they put their request before Jesus.

You see James and John didn’t really know what they were asking. They had expected that the kingdom Jesus would bring was an earthly kingdom. What they didn’t realize was that that kingdom wouldn’t come unless Jesus died first, even though Jesus had told them this three times. They were thinking of Jesus as the Messiah with a human understanding.

Jesus asked them, “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

“Drink the cup” was a common expression that meant can you experience the kind of pain, suffering, and death that I am about to experience? And then can you raise from the dead?

“We can,” they answered. Pretty ignorant and presumptuous if you ask me!

Notice how Jesus responded to their request by not answering them directly but instead used it as teaching moment to address the upside down nature of God’s kingdom.

In the world’s way, those who are up at the top are served by those at the bottom. The rich, the famous, the elite. The ones who hold all the power. At times it seems that they are the ones who get to dictate how things go for the rest of us.

Jesus said, “not so with you.” In my kingdom come, things are very different. They are flopped. Those at the bottom, the poor, the unknown, the insignificant. They are the ones who should be served by those at the top.

If anyone wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

In antiquity, servants weren’t considered great. And slaves were relegated to the lowest cast of the household. They were given the most menial and lowest tasks, like washing people’s feet as they came into the house hold.

² “The Right Hand in Ancient Thinking,” NIV Archeological Study Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1983.

I remember walking through the streets of ancient Pompeii a few years back and being shown how sewage from the houses was dumped out onto the streets where overflowing fountains carried the sewage out of the city. So walking through the streets with sandals would have been quite nasty. Which is what would have made the foot washing slaves job all the more disgusting.

This would have been the job for the lowest of the low in the household.

But what did Jesus do? He modeled the nature of a servant, by washing his disciples feet and telling them that they should do the same thing for one another. Their leader. Their Messiah. Their coming king, doing for them, what a slave should have done.

Wash their feet.

In Matthew Jesus said, “The greatest among you will be your servant, for whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”³

And “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”⁴

The Apostle Paul echoed Jesus’ teaching when he wrote to the Church in Philippi saying, “

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4** not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. **5** In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: **6** Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; **7** rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.”

At Cascades, our church leadership structure is geared after this upside down model of service.

Some churches have a top down leadership model. The pastor is at the top with all the power and authority which is then dictated to their elders and deacons who’s job it is to get the congregation to do what the pastor commands from the top.

What we do is flip this model upside down. We believe that we are ordained to positions of service, not of power. So as pastor, I am here to serve the elders and deacons, who then in turn serve you, the members of the congregation in order to support you in the way the God is calling you to serve in the Church and in the world. This is why, when we held our strategic planning event back in January, there were thirty some people involved. Because we believe that God speaks through you the members of the congregation and our job as elders is help tease out the direction where God is leading us.

³ Matthew 23:11-12

⁴ Matthew 20:16

Do you see the difference?

Martin Luther King Jr once said, “Everybody can be great because everybody can serve.” – “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?”

Quaker Theologian Richard Foster said, “There is a difference between choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant. When I choose to serve, I retain control about whom I serve and when I serve. But when I choose to be a servant, I have given up all rights and all control.”

One of the things we heard from you during the strategic planning session was that while you valued the work we do in giving grants to the underserved/under-resourced families in our community, that you really miss doing the hands on work of service in our community. For that reason, you will be hearing from at least one of our partner mission organizations each month. They will share a minute for mission of what they do in our community to serve. Listen closely for the invitation from the Lord to get involved with these activities. Talk with the speakers afterwards. Ask how you can get involved.

Go from simply serving where you staying in control of what and how much you do, to becoming a servant who simply asks what needs to be done? Send me!

Ultimately Jesus modeled the pinnacle of self-effacing sacrifice. He said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Again this notion that the Son of Man would serve and not be served and would actually offer his life for the world was a strange concept for the disciples. Though Jesus had spoken of it several times, they still didn’t seem to get it.

The Greek word that Mark used for ransom is lytron. A lytron was a redemption price paid to gain back a slave’s freedom. It comes from the root word luo which means to loosen as in loosening the bonds that held a slave to their master.

The Apostle Paul said, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁵

And again, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”⁶

Jesus did the ultimate act of selfless service by offering himself as the ransom or lytton to set us free from the chains of sin that hold us back from being all that God intends us to be as freed people.

“Toward the end of his life,” it is said that “Albert Einstein removed the portraits of two scientists--Newton and Maxwell--from his wall and replaced them

⁵ Romans 6:23

⁶ Romans 5:8

with portraits of Gandhi and Schweitzer. He explained it was time to replace the image of success with the image of service.”⁷

So may we see that Jesus’ kingdom is truly one that is upside down. May we believe our calls to serve exist at the cross-section of the world’s greatest need and our greatest passion. And may say “Here I am Lord. Send me to serve, not as I will, but as you will.” Amen.

⁷ Taken from Christianity Today, August 12, 1988, p. 72. as posted on Preaching Today Website.