

Written Copy: Mark 10:42-45 “How Jesus Defines Greatness”

5th Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 21th, 2021

Text: Mark 10:42-45

⁴² 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. 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."

The text's intent

As Jesus irresolutely heads toward His passion and resurrection in Jerusalem once again teaches the Disciples what must happen. But they do not understand what He is teaching, and instead focus on their place and authority they will have the newly restored Davidic Kingdom they believe Jesus will establish. Jesus teaches that the only throne He will ascend to is the cross where He will reveal the glorious power of God Himself to save His creation from sin, eternal death, and the devil. He will do so by drinking the cup of God's wrath for mankind and suffering the baptism of death in His passion. He then goes on to teach them what greatness is in His kingdom: it means serving God and everyone else and doing so as a slave who receives no compensation, but simply serves His master. The greatest one among them is Jesus Himself who is God incarnate, coming not to be served by His creation, but in His passion to serve as the redeeming sacrifice to save them.

Focus Statement:

Jesus has come to reveal the glory He has, but not on a throne, but instead through His passion and suffering on the cross. There He will show Himself to be the God incarnate that takes the cup of wrath His creatures deserve to drink, and in doing so be baptized into their death, to serv as the ransom payment to free all who believe from sin, death, and the devil. Greatness in His kingdom is about serving God and one another in love sacrificially.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We see greatness in the world defined by how much authority one has to impose change and one's will upon another. Those who are great rule and those who are not serve. We seek to follow those who will impose changes in the world that match what we desire to see happen, like the 12 wanted to be a part of calling the shots in Jesus takes the throne and reveals His glory as the ruler of the restored Davidic Kingdom.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Refocus our lives not on imposing our will and our plan on others, but serving God's will and plan to be the Church that worships our redeemer and shares His love with one another and the world.

Subject Sentence: Greatness in Jesus kingdom is serving as a slave.

Introduction: How the World Defines Greatness

In your lifetime who do you consider to be a great president? On the Republican side you might suggest Ronald Reagan. He came along at a time when his party was in disarray from the damage done by the Nixon administration and the Watergate Scandal, and unified many diverse segments of our country into being his supporters. He overhauled tax code exempting millions of low-income families. He presided over enjoying its longest recorded period of peacetime prosperity without recession or depression. But perhaps one of his greatest accomplishments was the end of the Cold War with Russia, epitomized by his speech on June 12th, 1987 at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin: ***“General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”*** Two years later, the wall was torn down. Ronald Reagan is seen as a great president who was able to impose his will and plan not only domestically as the leader of the United States, but as the spokesperson for Democracy worldwide.

In the Democratic camp the great president of our time might be Barak Obama. He is credited with rescuing the country from the Great Recession, and cutting the unemployment rate from 10% to 4.7% over six years. He signed the Affordable Care Act which provided health insurance to over 20 million uninsured Americans. He ended the war in Iraq. And he ordered the capture and killing of Osama Bin Laden. One of his memorable quotes is: ***“There is not a liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America. There is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America - there's the United States of America.”*** President Obama was able to impose his will and plan through the aggressive use of executive power to overcome obstacles imposed by Congress.

While your personal opinion of the job these men did as president probably depends on your affiliation with their political party, the fact remains that both President Reagan and President Obama were successful in imposing their will upon our nation and in the world. And that is how the world defines greatness. But as Christians, should we have a different definition of what true greatness is?

The Disciples Dream of Greatness

Perhaps you haven't really given thought to how God would have us ascribe greatness. Jesus' disciples spent a fair amount of time thinking about it. "Who's the greatest" is a repeated theme among them in the Gospel Narratives, and we see the question surface again in our Gospel Reading. It comes as what on the surface seems to be a change in subject from what Jesus is trying to teach them.

As our Gospel Lesson opens Jesus is on the road heading from Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate what will be His final Passover. He is leading the way with a large group following, including His 12 Disciples. Many of these believed Jesus to be the Messiah, and they were looking for Him to accomplish what they desired Him to do as the Messiah. They wanted a Messiah that would save them from Roman rule by establishing the Kingdom of David once again. They wanted Jesus to be the prophesied king in the line of David who established the permanent reign and rule of Israel once again in Jerusalem. But there are mixed feelings about this among those following Jesus. Some are “amazed” or perhaps overwhelmed, or even excited about the thought that what they and their forefathers had waited so long for was finally coming to pass. But others were fearful, perhaps thinking about the possible bloodshed that might come with Rome’s resistance to give up their rule and power over Palestine.

At some point during this journey Jesus calls the 12 apart from the rest of those following to talk with them privately. We are not specifically told which camp these 12 fall into, but judging from Jesus address to them, it’s safe to say they were more excited than fearful. So once again, for the 3rd time, Jesus explains what must happen when He comes to Jerusalem. **Mark 10:33-34** ³³ **"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."** Jesus, in this address, puts great emphasis on each part of what must happen. He will be handed over in betrayal to the Religious Leaders. He will be condemned to death by them, He will be handed over to the Romans. He will be mocked. He will be spit upon. He will be flogged, meaning that He will be tied to a post and whipped with a leather whip that has metal shards attached at the end. He will be killed. But then, after three days, He will rise from death.

None of that speech seems to have made the impression Jesus desired it to make on the 12. In response to this we see James and John approach. While they are the first to ask Jesus for something, all they’ve done is beat the other 10 to the punch. Jesus taught them before this at the Sermon on the Mount to “Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.” So they ask **Mark 10:35-37** 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."**

How is that they follow Jesus' passion prediction with this kind of a request? Luke's Gospel helps a little with that: **(Luke 18:34) But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.** But they do know this, when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, the end result will be Him coming into His glory, which to them means He will ascend to His glorious throne and reign and rule the restored kingdom of Israel. And they want a piece of the action. These two want positions of power and influence in this restored kingdom, by being 2nd and 3rd banana to King Jesus. To this Jesus responds in **Mark 10:38-39** 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?"** ^{39a} **And they said to him, "We are able."**

They really don't have any idea what they are really asking. They seek to be a part of His reign and rule, and so do the other 10, as can be seen by their angry and indignant response to James and John. How do they view greatness? Jesus describes their view in **Mark 10:42** **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.** It's the same way we define greatness in the world. Those who would rule exercise influence, power, and authority over others. They are able to impose their will on others, for good or for bad. We evaluate the job they are doing based on how closely the will and plan they impose match our will, plan, and desire for our current situation and our future. We might not see ourselves as 2nd or 3rd in command. But just as they wanted Jesus to be the kind of king they long for, we want our officials to be the kind of leaders that benefit us. Doing that would make them great leaders in our book.

Jesus Definition of Greatness

But Jesus defines greatness exactly opposite from what the world does. **Mark 10:43-44** 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.** Greatness in Jesus kingdom is not the person who imposes their own will and plan. It's the one who serves the will and plan of another. It's the one who serves the needs of another. It's the one who serves as a slave not earning any benefit for themselves, but serves out of love for his master.

Greatness finds its source in Jesus Christ. **Mark 10:45 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 Son of Man who is God incarnate came to fulfill the prophetic word of the Suffering Servant of **Isaiah 53:3-5** **³ He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.** This prophecy finds its fulfillment in what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem on Good Friday. He served by being your sacrifice for sin. He served by allowing Himself to be stricken, smitten, and afflicted by the hand of God working through evil men. He served you by taking your place and being crushed by the weight of your sin. He served the plan of the Heavenly Father to be the means that would bring you peace with God by removing from you the punishment you deserve.

All that He suffered at the hands of the Jewish ruling council and the Romans was the cup of God's wrath that He took for you and me. He was baptized into your death to bring you eternal healing. He gave His life as the ransom payment for you, to save you from the enemies you could never defeat which are sin, death, and the devil. And in the resurrection, we have proof that He was victorious for all for us. By His stripes we have been healed. Healed now, so that we can live a life of service to Him now, receive complete and total healing in the eternal life to come.

Being Great Servants/Slaves in Jesus' Kingdom

What does it mean for you and I as we live out our lives being in this world but not of this world? **Mark 10:43b-44** **^{43b} But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.** As members of His Church, His disciples, who are to follow in His footsteps, we are not to seek greatness by imposing our will on others, by demanding our way, our will, and our plan. We are not to seek greatness by electing officials who will impose their will that stands in opposition to God's will as expressed in Scripture. We are not to seek greatness by supporting policies and laws that favor us at the expense of the underprivileged or the unborn. Being a servant means we serve to fulfill the will of the one who is truly our Lord and King. And He commands us to love and serve Him by loving and serving others instead of serving ourselves. He says we must be a slave to all, especially of Him and His call to share the Gospel by word and deed. We do this as slaves who do not earn anything for ourselves, but serve out of love for our master who, out of the greatest love there is, became the ransom payment that brings to you and to me life with Him now, and eternal life to come.

Conclusion

As you can see, it's not easy. Our sinful heart wants what it wants. When what God wants from us is not too much of a sacrifice then we are on board with it. But our Lord always wants us to put His will and plan first, and that always includes putting others second ahead of ourselves. And in this life, we will always fall back on being like the disciples, wanting Jesus to be our kind of Savior, and ignore His call to sacrifice our own will, and pick up the cross of service to others. But that is precisely why **(Mark 10:45) For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.** Whenever we default to the Disciples idea of greatness, the Spirit comes and sets us straight. His life being the ransom that still offers to us forgiveness. As we sang at the beginning of the Service. *"Baptismal waters cover me, as I approach on bended knee; My Father's mercy here I plead, for grievous sins of thought and deed. I look to Christ upon the tree, His body broken there for me; I lay before Him all my sin, My darkest secrets from within. Lord may Your wounded hand impart Your healing to my broken heart; Your love along can form in me a heart that serves you joyfully"*. And therein lies the answer to how to be great in Jesus' kingdom, by being a humble repentant servant, forgiven by Him. Amen.