Mark Lesson 35 (2023)

**NOT TO BE SERVED BUT TO SERVE**

*(Subtitle: The Servant Leadership)*

Mark 10:32-45

Key Verse: 10:45

“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.”

In the previous passage, Mark 10:1-31, we learned several spiritual truths concerning God’s kingdom and eternal life: first, a happy marriage is the fruit of a lifelong commitment and healthy partnership between husband and wife (10:1-12); second, we cannot experience God’s kingdom unless we become like a little child by being transformed from the inside out (10:13-16); and third, as Jesus’ disciples we should pursue the treasure from heaven and the reward will be great (10:17-31). These are essential spiritual qualities of God’s children and Jesus’ disciples. Even though Mark’s gospel is the shortest among the gospel narratives, it contains so much of treasures from heaven.

A few weeks ago, and during our Spring Retreat, we studied Matthew 20:17-28, identical to today’s passage. We remember the lecture given by Joseph Han Jr., so I thought we should skip this passage and move on to the next one. I know nobody wants to hear the same message repeatedly. Yet, I decided not to miss it because today’s passage is the central theme of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Jesus told his disciples, “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.” Jesus also taught his disciples that true greatness in God’s kingdom does not stem from a high position or power but from humility and serving others. We may call it servant leadership. This morning let’s think about why we should be servant leaders and how to practice servant leadership.

Look at verses 32-34. “They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ‘We are going up to Jerusalem,’ he said, ‘and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him, and kill him. Three days later, he will rise.’” According to Mark’s account, it was the third time Jesus predicted his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. (8:31, 9:31) In the previous occasions, Jesus had plainly predicted his suffering, death, and resurrection. But this time, he described more precisely that he would be condemned by the Jewish religious leaders and handed over to the Gentiles, who would humiliate, torture, and execute him. On his way up to Jerusalem, Jesus took his twelve disciples aside and tried to get their particular attention.

The passion Jesus had to go through in Jerusalem includes horrifying and disturbing details. Yet, behind his repeated announcement were the messianic secrets that the Son of Man would be the ultimate sacrifice for the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). Jesus, being fully aware of what would happen to him in Jerusalem, wasn’t intimated. Instead, he went ahead of everyone, and his disciples were astonished and even afraid. After all, what surprises us is that his disciples didn’t even want to hear such an important announcement about the messianic secrets.

Why was it so? It’s because they were preoccupied with their human expectations that Jesus would build his fantastic messianic kingdom as he entered Jerusalem by destroying his enemies with divine power and authority. They went up to Jerusalem with Jesus but were not on the same page.

Look at verses 35-37. “Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask.’ ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked. They replied, ‘Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.’” This segment of the passage reveals once again how irrelevant his disciples were. They were totally out of context due to their selfish ambition. Yet, Jesus didn’t brush off their request or rebuke them. Instead, he asked them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Perhaps, this time James and John got closer to Jesus and explained what they wanted from him, *“Well, we want you to let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory. That’s all.”* They wanted the positions of highest honor in Jesus’ earthly kingdom, which they expected Jesus would soon establish. Humanly speaking, James and John were related to Jesus through their mother, Salome, the sister of Mary – Jesus’ mother. (Mt. 27:55-56) They could justify their special request, saying, *“If our cousin brother, Jesus, becomes a king of the New Israel, don’t we deserve to be appointed to be the next in power? Possibly the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense”* Their request revealed their hidden selfish ambition. (Pic#1)

How did Jesus respond to their request? Look at verse 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?’” I assume Jesus could have shaken his head because of their selfish ambition, especially right after hearing about what he had to go through in Jerusalem. Yet, he didn’t rebuke them. He was patient with them. Then, he asked if they could drink the cup he would drink and be baptized with the baptism he would be baptized with. He meant to say that the way to glory is always the way to suffering. In other words, there is no glory apart from suffering.

Here, the “cup” and “baptism” refer to what Jesus would face in Jerusalem, including his suffering and death on the cross, which even Jesus struggled with. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, “*O my Father, if it is possible, let his cup pass from me.”* (Mt. 26:39) If James and John knew exactly what the cup and baptism truly meant, they would not have been so confident as to say, “We can!” But they were ambitious enough to get a high position at all costs, so they answered in unison, *“Sure, we can handle it.”* I think we laugh at them because we are not different from them.

However, according to Jesus, they would not get the highest position in Jesus’ earthly kingdom even though they would experience a measure of suffering as his disciples. We know that later on, James became the first apostle to experience martyrdom (Acts 12:2), while his brother John was the last of the Twelve Apostles to die. (Rev. 1:9) Jesus said, “But to sit at my right or left is not from me to grant. These places belong to those from whom they have been prepared.” (40)

What does it mean to us? It means that when we serve Jesus the way we ought to serve, we will surely get what we deserve. God will repay each person according to what they have done. (Ro. 2:6) Therefore, we don’t need to worry about who gets the honor and glory. Our primary concern should be serving the Lord and his people, not getting recognition. If I desire good health and still eat junk food all the time, would I be healthy? No. We reap from what we sow.

It reminds us of Galatians 6:7-9, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time; we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

Look at verse 41. “When the ten heard this, they became indignant with James and John.” The indignant reaction of the other disciples reveals that selfish ambition also motivated them. They were angry at James and John because they wanted those positions themselves. They might have thought, *“Ah, why didn’t I think of it and ask Jesus first?”* They were also guilty of the sin of envy and selfish ambition. Even though they were together physically, they were not united due to their selfish ambition.

The sin of envy and selfish ambition often prevents us from supporting other Christians genuinely and establishing unity. It’s a shame that the wickedness of selfish ambition, envy, and jealousy is prevalent even among Christians but least mentioned and repented. This also reminds us of James 3:16-17, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

Jesus saw the danger of selfish ambition that could destroy the unity among his disciples. Look at verses 42-44. “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. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be slave of all.”

What did Jesus do for them? ***First of all, we see that Jesus called them together.*** This is how Jesus solved disagreements among his disciples. **“Called them together.”** We, as Christian disciples, can have conflicts and differences. But one of the best ways to resolve disunity is to fellowship with each other in Christ Jesus. The English word ***“fellowship”*** is derived from the Greek word ***“Koinonia,”*** which means ***“to have in common,” “to share,” or “to have fellowship***.” The early Christians described in Acts 2:42 shows that they constantly devoted themselves to fellowship. They shared the meals together. Where there is a genuine fellowship among brothers and sisters, there is unity and harmony despite differences.

***Second, Jesus instructed them on true greatness.*** As Jesus gathered his disciples, he taught them that the leadership in God’s kingdom differed from the secular world's hierarchical leadership. In a hierarchical world system, everything is from top to bottom. The more important you are, the more people serve you. So, people try hard to climb up to higher positions by all means, often playing dirty politics. However, the leadership style among God’s people in God’s kingdom is not from top to bottom. Jesus said that whoever wants to become great among God’s people must be the one who humbles themselves and serves others. He highlighted by repeating twice. “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” (43-44)

We might call it *“a servant-leadership.”* Servant leadership is the primary principle that Jesus’ followers should relate to one another and serve God’s flock with their care. The term ***“servant leader”*** conveys a paradoxical concept. *“Shall we serve only when we become a leader?”* Or *“Shall we serve genuinely even before we become recognized leaders?”* *“What is our priority?”*

What do you think?We should serve first. The first person who used the “servant leader” was **Robert K. Greenleaf** (1904-199), a teacher and philosopher in the US. He said this country was in a leadership crisis due to the lack of servant leaders. In his 1970 essay, he said, “*The servant leader is servant first… it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. The conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”*

Servant leadership is the leadership Jesus taught his disciples two thousand years ago. What is remarkable about servant leadership is that we should serve others not because we must or want to become leaders but because we are willing. There is a vast difference between serving out of duty and serving because of willingness to serve. Serving out of willingness is only possible if we maintain genuine love and humility. Otherwise, after helping others, we may fall into self-pity, self-righteousness and become manipulative. Thus it is toxic.

This reminds us of what Apostle Peter said in his letter, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.” (1 Peter 5:3-4)

From Jesus’ perspective, the future of God’s kingdom on earth depends on what kind of leadership we practice as his disciples. As Jesus’ disciples, we should learn and practice the servant leadership principle until it becomes our habit and lifestyle.

Jesus is the prime example of humble servant leadership. Read verse 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.” This reveals the astonishing truth about Jesus. Even though Jesus was God in nature, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges, took the very heart of a servant, and became like an ordinary man. He lived as a man in the context of the culture and tradition of the world. His family was not affluent, and he had to support his mother and young siblings as a carpenter. Serving was his habit and lifestyle even before he started his ministry.

During his messianic ministry on earth, he humbly served his disciples and a significant number of people who were in need. He even washed his disciples’ stinky feet like a servant. He was humble, friendly, and open to everyone, including children, women, and social outcasts. Jesus not only served us, but he also offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. Jesus was truly remarkable because of his humility and self-sacrifice for all humankind.

Do you think Jesus felt miserable after his serving? No. He was happiest because his humility and sacrifice were out of love. **“Not to be served, but to serve!”** Well, we should not refuse to be served. That can be unhealthy. Sometimes, we should let others serve us. But we should not feel entitled and insist that others always help us. Servant leadership is needed everywhere: homes, churches, schools, companies, and nations. Developing servant leadership starts within our family circle and between husband and wife. It does not always taste sweet but is bitter, like drinking the cup of suffering. Yet, it would not remain bitter. It can be changed into a cup of joy and glory someday. The cup Jesus drank through the complete sacrifice on the cross now brings the joy of salvation, love, and peace. One of the greatest blessings of practicing servant leadership is the actualization of God’s kingdom in our lives. We can taste God’s kingdom as we are willing to serve others. May we continue to grow in our humility and servant leadership. May the Lord bless us to practice servant leadership daily and experience and share God’s kingdom. “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.”