

Series: What We Need Now

Title: Genuine Humility

Text: Mark 10:35-45

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Verses 35 and 36

In Mark 10:35-45, we read of the way in which James and John, two of Jesus' most prominent disciples, sought positions for themselves. Matthew's gospel tells us that their mother was involved in the scheme (Matthew 20:20). Verse 35 begins the narrative, saying, "James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached him and said, 'Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask you'" (Matthew 10:35). Considering the pronouncement Jesus just made concerning His resurrection (Mark 10:34), the title "teacher" seems insufficient. The disciples still failed to recognize Jesus' divine nature.

In approaching Jesus, they used tactics that have been used for millennia. They asked Him to grant a request before they made it known. They said, "We want you to do whatever we ask you." One has said the disciples were "like spoiled children" in their attempts to manipulate Jesus.¹ Whether consciously or subconsciously, the disciples used such a manipulation tactic because they knew their request was self-serving. They painted the Lord into a proverbial corner, attempting to gain the upper-hand. Ironically, their tactic was similar to the ones employed by Jesus' opponents (Mark 12:14). In grace and forbearance, the Lord engaged His disciples, responding with a question – "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:36).

Verse 37

In verse 37, James and John make their request plain, saying, "Allow us to sit at your right and at your left in your glory" (Mark 10:37). It seems the two had heard Jesus' third prediction concerning his resurrection (Mark 10:34) and mistook it as an eschatological claim concerning His physical kingdom.² They believed their leader would soon vanquish Roman occupation and establish His rule. Like many, they were "looking for a grand Jewish world empire with apocalyptic features in the eschatological culmination of the Messiah's kingdom."³

Maybe James and John mistook resurrection of Mark 10:34 as a reference to political glory. Such seems to be the case. It appears that Mark strategically depicts the disciples as having confusion after each of Jesus' three crucifixion/resurrection announcements. See Mark 8:32 and 9:32-33 for the other two occurrences of such confusion.

The folly of James and John persists to this day. There are many Christ followers who seem to be more concerned with Christ's physical reign than His spiritual reign.

¹ Robertson, 354.

² Ferguson, 172-173.

³ Robertson, 354.

They spent more time in political activism than they do in Christian evangelism. Their greatest desire seems to be for Christ to establish His physical and political dominion. Missions and gospel proclamation don't seem to be as important. Such believers have potentially lost sight of the fact that Christ does not intend to extend a political kingdom during the church age. He will indeed come to rule with a scepter upon the Earth one day (Revelation 19:11-15). For now, He intends to rule in the hearts of men, women, boys, and girls. May we not be like James and John, fighting for a quasi-Christian political kingdom at the expense of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Engagement in the political arena is not wrong. It has its place, but it should not override our devotion to Christ's mission for His church.

James and John's misunderstanding prompted them to ask for prime positions of authority in what they thought was the Messiah's soon-coming administration. In particular, they asked to sit at Jesus' "right" and "left" hand. The original language of the text depicts forcefulness in the disciples' request. It implements an aorist imperative, a tense and mood that calls for a certain action with a sense of urgency.⁴ James and John hotly desired positions of honor.

In their mind, it was probably logical for them to be near the Anointed One's throne. They had already been identified as a part of Jesus' inner-circle. They had been called to follow Jesus before most of the other disciples, being picked along with Peter and Andrew at the outset of the Lord's ministry (Mark 1:16-19). On top of this, the Lord had previously used them in unique ways, choosing them, along with Peter, to accompany Him in special tasks (Mark 5:37 and 9:2). It may have been that Jesus had publicly identified the three as his closest confidants. Maybe they had positions of honor when the band of disciples shared a meal for Jesus.⁵

What they asked for, however, was a bit presumptuous. The "right" hand was a position of honor in the ancient world (Hebrews 1:3 and 10:12). Based upon Messianic truth from Psalm 110:1, it had strong associations with the Anointed One's Kingdom. Being regarded as the predominate hand, the right hand that was most active, and usually most powerful in the ancient world. The right hand of a king's throne was reserved for whoever was second in command. The left hand was not a position of insignificance. It was still a desired position, since it was near the throne. However, it didn't concur as much power as the righthand.⁶ By asking for the two positions, James and John asked for the most prime places of power in the kingdom. To sit at the right or left meant one had a place of prominence and prestige.

Verse 38

In response to the disciples' blustering request, Jesus responded, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink or to be baptized with the baptism I

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 90.

⁵ Ferguson, 173.

⁶ Schnabel, 250.

am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38). The phrase translated “you’re asking” uses middle voice language. In the original language of the text, Mark places emphasis on the fact that James and John’s question was for themselves.⁷ They were self-focused and preoccupied with their own desires. They were not seeking “first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

Herein lies the greatest enemy to humility — self-centeredness. Many assume humility is about a certain disposition — a quiet nature, soft-sounding voice, or a basic congeniality. The Bible teaches that true humility goes far beyond such outward displays. It has its root in the heart of a man or woman. Humility starts with a soul that is focused primarily on the Lord and others, as opposed to being focused on self (Matthew 22:37-40).

In the original language of the text, Jesus posed a question that demanded a negative response.⁸ The disciples indeed were unaware of all that was involved with their request. May we learn from their folly. Don’t we sometimes make demands of God that are unreasonable? Do we not merely see things dimly and incompletely, like “a reflection as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12)? May we learn to not ask inappropriately from God, to be better at listening than requesting (Matthew 13:9 and 43; Mark 4:9, 7:33, and 8:18; and Luke 9:44 and 14:35). May we aim to live for His will, not ours. His principles and precepts should be our guiding light, not our perspectives and prerogatives.

The disciples didn’t know what they were asking because they had missed the meaning of Jesus’ death predictions (Mark 8:31; 9:31; and 10:34). They were not mindful of the way in which Jesus would drink of a certain “cup” and be “baptized with” a certain “baptism.” In the first century Jewish world, a “cup” was a symbol of suffering. Jesus will employ the metaphor again when He initiates the Lord’s Supper (Mark 14:24) and when He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). For now, Jesus uses the term to allude to His upcoming death.

Like the word “cup,” baptism also had connotations related to suffering. Though it evokes ritualistic thoughts today, because of its association with the second ordinance of the church, the word translated “baptism” simply meant “to dip” or “immerse.” In many languages the verb equivalents for the term are used to convey the idea of “undergoing” an ordeal.⁹ Maybe you have heard an exasperated person opine that he or she feels “overwhelmed.” The term was sometimes used figuratively of hardship. Such was the case with the Koine Greek word translated “baptism.” It was used as a metaphor to speak of one being plunged into difficulty. In regard to Jesus, the term likens His sufferings and death to “a raging flood of sorrow.”¹⁰ Our Lord Himself used baptism as a metaphor for His death in Luke 12:50. Paul did too in Romans 6:4.

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 90.

⁸ Ferguson, 173.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 90.

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 90.

James and John were oblivious to the necessity of Messiah's death. In all of their Scripture study, they had overlooked passages like Isaiah 53:5 — "But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him." They missed the meaning of prophecies like Daniel 9:26 — "After those sixty-two weeks the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing." They had the same shortcoming as Peter back in Mark 8:32. Plain and simple, they were ignorant of the fact that Messiah would come to make atonement for sin. They wanted a sovereign Messiah, not a suffering one. One has correctly commented, "They were looking for a crown without a cross, glory without suffering, honor without humility."¹¹ They needed to remember the pronouncement of Jesus back in Mark 8:34 — "'If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.'"

Verse 39

Hearing Jesus' question, the disciples boldly responded — "We are able" (Mark 10:39). Answering with an absolute affirmative, James and John had no doubt that they could share Jesus' cup with Him. Their mistake rested in their misunderstanding of Christ's mission. In the ancient world, a king was known for possessing a special, illustrious cup that was used at royal banquets. Normally the most special guests were allowed to drink from the cup with the King.¹² The two disciples assumed Jesus was talking about such a vessel. They missed the meaning of the metaphor. Once again, the cross was the furthest thing from their minds (Mark 8:31; 9:31; and 10:34).

The Twelve also suffered from a case of unwise self-confidence. They were too sure of themselves spiritually. In Mark's gospel, we've already seen that the group was well acquainted with failure. Remember how they responded to a storm on the sea in Mark 4:38. Recall their fright when Jesus walked on the water in Mark 6:49. Think about the spiritual powerlessness they exhibited in Mark 9:18. Considering their long line of failures, it was absurd for the disciples to show such confidence in our current text. They needed an awareness that "Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

May we learn a lesson from the Twelve. There is a need for us to be on guard against being too spiritually sure of ourselves. Scripture teaches, "Whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). If we aren't on the lookout, overconfidence can overcome us. Haughtiness and unhealthy self-confidence have ruined many. Let's make sure we stay humble, always remembering "The heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

In response to James and John's bold affirmation, Jesus affirmed that they would indeed face the cup of suffering. They would be baptized into the hardship of persecution. Jesus said, "You will drink the cup I drink, and you will be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with" (Mark 10:39). With Jesus' words, we have an instance of

¹¹ Ferguson, 173.

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 90.

prophecy from our Lord, prophecy that would later be fulfilled.¹³ In John's gospel, Jesus similarly foretold of the resistance the apostles would encounter (John 21:18-23). History attests to the fact that the two men indeed encountered great hardship for the name of Christ. John was exiled to the Island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). James was martyred by Herod (Acts 12:1-2). In the end eleven of the twelve apostles would face a martyr's death. The only one to escape such martyrdom, John (John 21:22-23,) would face imprisonment and exile. He would be bound and tortured by the cruel, Roman emperor Domitian.¹⁴

Verse 40

Attempting to correct His disciples expectations in verse 40, Jesus says, "To sit at my right or left is not mine to give; instead, it is for those for whom it has been prepared" (Mark 10:40). Our Lord's words were eschatological. They foretold of future rewards that will one day be given to believers. Positions of judgment within the New Heaven and New Earth are one aspect of God's plan for eternal retribution (1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; and Revelation 21:24).

In the original language of our current text, Jesus uses a perfect tense verb. The language conveys the idea that such positions of judgment have already been prepared. One has said it could be translated "It has been prepared and stands ready."¹⁵ The language is also passive voice, employing what theologians often call "the Divine passive."¹⁶ The syntax emphasizes the fact that the positions of authority in Christ's kingdom will be granted from God alone. Because He is eternal and timeless, the Lord has prepared eternal rewards for His children since eternity past (Romans 8:28-30 and Revelation 13:8). Instead of jockeying for position and making vain attempts at being number one, faithful Christians should trust in sovereignty and providence.

Jesus' words should not be twisted to imply He has a lesser status than God the Father. By saying it was not His "to give" positions of authority in the Kingdom, the Lord was not implying a less-than-God status. Instead, He was simply acknowledging the temporarily subordinate role He received through the incarnation. He self-imposed Himself to the will of the Father when He stepped into the human condition (Philippians 2:6-7). He emptied Himself to do the Father's will (John 6:38). Even in saying "to sit at my right or left is not mine to give" Jesus taught a lesson servanthood. Because He was willing to submit to the Father and serve, James and John should have been as well.

Verse 41

Overhearing Jesus' dialogue with James and John, the other disciples became infuriated. Mark records, "When the ten disciples heard this, they began to be indignant with James

¹³ Brooks, 168.

¹⁴ Brooks, 169.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 90-91.

¹⁶ Brooks, 169.

and John” (Mark 10:41). Why were the others angry? It seems they were motivated, to some degree or another, by the same self-centered pride as the two brothers. We know their anger was not of the righteous sort (Ephesians 4:26), because Jesus will rebuke them in the next few verses (Mark 10:42-45).

It seems that all twelve of the disciples were eaten up with passions for promotion and prestige. We have seen such ungodly passions from them already in Mark’s gospel (Mark 9:34 and 10:13). Such desire for acclaim will later be put on full display when the Twelve all forsake Jesus at His arrest (Mark 14:50 and 66-72). Because they were focused on power and prominence, they were unable to comprehend the meaning of Christ’s suffering and death.

Verse 42

Contrary to the way in which unbelievers approach leadership and power, Christ followers are to have a different perspective. Jesus told His disciples, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them” (Mark 10:42). His words described the common methods of leadership amongst “the Gentiles.” The language was first used of non-Jews, but it came to be a moniker for those who did not know the one, true God. A Gentile was a godless person.

According to Jesus, Gentiles commonly had abrasive and abusive leadership styles. They were known for absolute and autocratic displays of power. The Greek word underlying the translation “lord it over” is a compound word that literally means “rule over.” It portrays the act of one using his or her power to benefit self at the detriment of others.¹⁷ It was commonly used of tyrants.¹⁸ Christ employed the word to teach that His followers should not live by the same values as worldly people. Leadership in the Kingdom is to be characterized by responsibilities, not rights; service, not the spotlight; humility, not hierarchy; selflessness, not self-advancement.

Verses 43-44

In verses 43-44, Jesus sought to correct His disciples understanding of greatness. He said, “But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all” (Mark 14:43-44). Our Lord wanted His disciples to know that His kingdom was to be characterized by a different set of leadership values. The ways of the Lord are different than the ways of the world. In the kingdom of Christ, the mantra for greatness should be the same as the refrain from the famous limbo song — “How low can you go?” The way up is down in God’s eyes. The Bible says, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (James 4:6 and

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 91.

¹⁸ Schnabel, 252.

10). Jesus championed lowliness of mind, saying, “Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

In verses 43 and 44, Mark uses two words to depict the type of leadership Jesus’ disciples are to embrace. The first word is found at the end of verse 43. It is translated “servant.” It carried ideas of subordination and service to the commands of another.¹⁹ It was used in the ancient world of one who waited on tables.²⁰ The second word appears in verse 44. It is rendered “slave.” The term was used of one who was owned by a master; thus, it depicted a greater degree of servitude than the one involved with being a “servant.”²¹ A “slave” possessed no rights under the law. He or she was completely given over to the will and wishes of his or her master.²² Together, both the titles “servant” and “slave” picturesquely display the posture of service that ought to be embraced by all Christ followers. Each should recognize that he or she labors underneath the dictates of a Sovereign Master. He or she is owned by Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19-20); as a result, faithful service ought to be offered for His glory.

The Lord had already taught His disciples about this subject. In Mark 9:35, He had said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be last and servant of all.” To be great in God’s eyes, believes should get their eyes off of themselves. Instead of having a self-oriented prerogative, they should develop a preoccupation with the needs, desires, and feelings of others (Romans 15:1-3). May modern Christians learn to live by the truth of Philippians 2:3-4 — “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.” One has said, “True greatness is measured by our service...not in how high up the ladder we have climbed, but how far down the ladder we are prepared to climb for the sake of others. True discipleship has at its heart letting go of our desire for honor in this world, in order to bestow honor on others.”²³ Another has said, “greatness means service and prominence means working for the benefit of fellow believers.”²⁴

Verse 45

In verse 45, Jesus appealed to His own example. He reminded His disciples that He Himself had embodied the posture of a servant, saying, “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” (Mark 10:45). The Twelve had seen the way in which Jesus ministered to others. They had experienced

¹⁹ Schnabel, 253.

²⁰ Brooks, 170.

²¹ Schnabel, 254.

²² Brooks, 170.

²³ Ferguson, 174.

²⁴ Schnabel, 253.

Him washing their own feet (John 13:14-17). As followers of Him (Mark 1:17), it was expected that they similarly serve others.

Notice the title Jesus used of Himself in verse 45. He called Himself “the Son of Man.” The title was employed in reference to Jesus earlier in Mark’s gospel (Mark 2:10; 2:28; 8:31; 8:38; 9:9; 9:12; 9:31; and 10:33). It was, and still is, a distinctively Messianic moniker, drawn from Daniel’s prophecy — “I continued watching in the night visions, and suddenly one like a son of man was coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him” (Daniel 7:13). “Son of Man” was meant to emphasize the Messiah’s human nature. Though He was 100% God, Jesus was also 100% man. Through embracing humanity, Jesus embraced a posture of servanthood. Paul explains: “He emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-7). Jesus was the ultimate servant. He laid down His life on behalf of others. For all generations, He serves as an example of true service should look like.

But Jesus is much more than an example. He is also an empowerment. Through the gospel, believers have a share in His life. As a result, they have supernatural power for humility and Christ-like service. Jesus alludes to this reality in our text by proclaiming that He would “give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). The word ransom is one that was used in the ancient world of the price paid for the release of a captive.²⁵ In the noun form, it only appears here and in Matthew 20:28 within the New Testament. The verb form is found in 1 Peter 1:18 and Titus 2:14, two passages that describe our great salvation:

For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold (1 Peter 1:18).

He gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works (Titus 2:14).

Why does Jesus talk about our spiritual ransom within a conversation about servant leadership? He wanted to remind His disciples of what He was going to do on their behalf. Because He had a servant mindset, they needed to develop one as well. However, Jesus also wanted to show where disciples can get power for such service. Through the power of the gospel, believers can experience a transformation of the soul. Wherein we were previously slaves to sin and self, we have been set free by Jesus. He has liberated us from the power of the old man, making us free by paying a ransom (Isaiah 53:6 and Romans 5:6). We no longer have to live like Gentiles. The Holy Spirit within us can empower us to serve and to love (Romans 5:5).

²⁵ Gingrich and Danker, 120.