

# Free to Serve

## Purpose

To recognize that Jesus calls us to the true greatness that comes through serving others



The Scripture for this lesson is Mark 10:13-45.

## Listen

Mark 10:32-45

32 They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, 33 saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; 34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." 35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward 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 is it 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." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" 39 They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 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." 41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

**Key Verses:** *Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. (Mark 10:43b-44)*

## Look

Our day school chapel service always begins with the children processing into their places following the students selected to bear a candle lighter, a cross, a Bible, and some flowers. Large numbers of the children, even if they have done it within the past week, clamor for the privilege of being one of that day's "helpers." They all want to lead the procession.

The ambition of the children to be first among equals is nothing unusual, of course. It is easy for us to identify with Tom Sawyer who, sitting in church one Sunday and hearing the text read about the wolf living with the lamb and a little child leading them (Isaiah 11:6), could not help but long to be that child.<sup>1</sup> Almost everyone wants to be the leader, the star, the center of attention.

We all are a bit like James and John wanting to sit in glory. Like them, we would do well to hear the words of Jesus that "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44).

## Live

In the Gospel of Mark the disciples are a rather clueless bunch. In this Bible Lesson, Jesus has just told them (for the third time!) that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die and then be raised again; but James and John are so focused on their self-serving request that they are oblivious to what Jesus has just predicted about his fate.

When we read the Gospel of Mark and see the behavior of the disciples, we are inclined to shake our heads in disbelief at their thick-headedness. When Jesus made his first Passion prediction (Mark 8:31), Simon Peter had the temerity to rebuke Jesus for what he thought was a faithless statement. Peter had just proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, yet he was willing to argue with him (See Mark 8:31-33.). In Mark 9, Jesus makes his second Passion prediction; and the very next thing we read about is the disciples arguing about which of them was the highest ranked disciple, demonstrating that none of them was grasping what Jesus was saying about the cross in his future (9:30-35). Then when Jesus made his third Passion prediction, James and John showed the same lack of comprehension (10:32-45).

The message of Jesus was counter-intuitive. It was so different from the message the disciples expected that it was next-to-impossible for them to hear it. Their own agenda made their ears deaf to Jesus' words.

We are not all that different from James and John. In fact, the Gospel writer may have noted the apostles' lack of understanding for the simple reason that disciples of his

own time had trouble taking to heart the implications of the cross of Jesus. Anybody who spends much time around a church knows that petty politics play their role in church life. People want to be recognized as central players in what is going on.

***When have you been so focused on your agenda that you could not hear what others were saying? Why did the disciples have so much difficulty taking Jesus' talk of the cross seriously?***

### **A "Blank-Check" Favor**

For a couple of guys who were prominent leaders in Jesus' movement, James and John really did not know what was going on. As the Bible Lesson begins, the disciples are "puzzled and not just a little afraid."<sup>2</sup> Jesus talked of suffering and dying, but they just did not get it.

First they came to Jesus with an open-ended request: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (Mark 10:35). For anyone to agree to fulfill such a request demands more trust in the good sense of the person asking than Jesus had any reason to have in the apostles. There was no way he could write them such a "blank check." Perhaps they began their petition in such an oblique way because they had sense enough to be a bit embarrassed by the nature of the request. For his part, Jesus refused to be buffaloed into a premature agreement. "What is it you want me to do for you?" (10:36), he asked.

After James and John made their request, Jesus said that they did not know what they were asking (Mark 10:38). He then asked a couple of questions that they answered in the affirmative but nonetheless did not understand. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). In the Old Testament, the cup is sometimes a symbol of suffering (See Isaiah 51:17.). Certainly that was the case here. Later, when Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, he asked his Father to "remove this cup from me" (Mark 14:36). The baptism was clearly a baptism of death. Jesus was referring to his Passion and to his death on the cross.

For their parts, though they did not understand what Jesus was saying, James and John responded that they were "able" (Mark 10:39). Interestingly, Jesus agreed. They would be able. He said, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized" (10:39). Clue-less as they were, James and John would be given the grace and power one day to do things that at the time they did not understand.

Just how they were to drink the cup and to be baptized with Christ's baptism is the subject of debate. The reference may have contained a sacramental meaning. Through Holy Communion and baptism, they, along with the church they represented, would be included in the suffering and passion of Christ.

On the other hand, Jesus may have had the fates of James and John more particularly in mind. He may have been saying that they would indeed suffer in a manner similar to his own. We read in the Book of Acts that King Herod Agrippa had James killed with the sword (Acts 12:1-2). John's fate is less certain. One prominent tradition has him living to a ripe old age, the only apostle not to die a martyr's death. Another tradition claims, however, that like his brother James, he too died an early death.

Although James and John were destined to drink of the cup and to be baptized with Christ's baptism, Jesus could not agree to their request. "To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant," he said, "but it is for those for whom it has been prepared" (Mark 10:40). Had the disciples known that Jesus was referring to the two men who were to be crucified on either side of him, they probably would not have been so eager for such places of honor.

James and John's conversation with Jesus in this Bible Lesson is deliciously ironic. Jesus spoke with real knowledge about what was to take place soon. The reader also knows what was going to happen. James and John, however, were clueless. The Gospel writer did not belittle them for their ignorance, however. Jesus knew that faith was important to them. They just needed the further instruction that only the grim events of Jesus' death could supply.

***When have you asked someone for a "blank check" favor? How do you think that James and John "drank of Christ's cup"?***

### **Freedom to Forfeit Self**

After James and John's request, it was obvious to Jesus that his disciples did not have a sense of how his ways were different from the ways of the world. The anger of the other disciples towards James and John, when they found out what they had asked, demonstrated clearly that they were in the same place themselves.

So Jesus had to try to spell it out for them one more time: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:42-44). This is one more example of how Jesus turned the world's expectations and desires on their head.

As human beings we typically crave the power to compel others to do what we want. We do not have daydreams about growing up to be someone's servant. We dream of the days when our word is law, and others have to scramble to do our bidding. We want people waiting on us rather than the other way around.

What we really want is freedom. We want to be able to do what we want, when we want. We want the respect and the honor that come from freedom. We abhor the shame that we think adheres to those who are so in bondage to people or circumstances that they have to tolerate being told what to do. We all individually want to be the great one. Collectively, every nation craves being the great nation of the earth. All manner of conflict emerges from everyone wanting to be in charge. Our need to be at the center of the world provides its own kind of bondage.

True Christian freedom means something other than we commonly think. Martin Luther wrote, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." He followed that statement with another: "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>3</sup> In these twin statements he tried to give us a key to the nature of Christian freedom. It was not Christ's intention to keep Christians in bondage to anyone or anything. We are not to be in bondage even to our own need for liberty. We are to be free as Christ is free. He was not beholden to anyone except God. He was free to do as he pleased because what he pleased to do was God's will.

Yet, what did he do with his freedom? He went to the cross. He proved his freedom by choosing to give "his life [as] a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). To speak of "ransom" is to say that he freely gave his own life as bond for the manumission or the freedom of people sold in slavery. Out of his freedom, out of his inherent human dignity, he forfeited his freedom.

Crucifixion was an awful way to die. It involved being nailed to a cross. The victim had almost no freedom even to draw the next breath. Moreover, among the Jews crucifixion was widely construed as a sign that God had abandoned the one crucified. It bespoke the utter loss of liberty and was the surest sign of humiliation and shame. Yet, Jesus Christ embraced it out of his lordly freedom. The freest one of all consented to be made so low as to die on a cross. He made himself a slave so that those who were slaves could be free. His greatness lay not in what he could make other people do for him; his greatness lay in what he would do for the sake of others.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the image for true human greatness. If James and John or any of the other disciples wanted to be great, then they had to forego the world's notion of greatness. They needed to understand that greatness is not defined by how many people one can boss, how much one can buy, or how much of the world can be manipulated or controlled for the sake of one's own self-interest. They needed to embrace the cross and to make it the model for their lives. True greatness means that people are at liberty to forego their freedom and their prerogatives for the sake of service to others. True freedom is to have such control over one's self that one no longer needs the "honor" the world can give. One's honor is not signified by how many people can be made to serve one's self but by how much of one's self one can dedicate to the service of others.

***What is the Christ of the cross calling you to do in the way of service?***

***Almighty God, who patiently bears with humanity in all its foolishness and self-centeredness, give us such a share of the mind of Christ that we are able to serve others. In his name we pray. Amen.***

1 From *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, by Mark Twain (Oxford University Press, 1993); page 45.

2 From *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English*, by Eugene H. Peterson (Navpress, 1993); page 97.

3 From *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, edited by John Dillenberger (Doubleday, 1961); page 53.