

TRUE GREATNESS IS TO BECOME LIKE JESUS

Mark 10:32-52

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.”

Mark Zuckerberg is a billionaire Tech CEO, who manages one of the world’s largest and most profitable social media companies Facebook. Given people’s fascination with billionaires like Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, surely many young entrepreneurs want to emulate him right? Even though he’s wildly successful, he hasn’t been a very good human being. He stole the idea for Facebook from the Winklevoss Twins, and pushed his business partner and then CFO out of the company to pay the venture capitalist backing Facebook in the early days for his own benefit. The movie “The Social Network” portrays him having achieved success in creating a platform to make friends but having no friends himself. Or consider how hated Bill Gates was, even though he and his wife built the world’s largest charitable foundation. Speaking of which, he recently divorced his wife after 27 years of marriage, even though it seemed like they had one of the most uniquely perfect marriages. He famously said that spending Sunday morning in church was the biggest waste of time anyone could engage in—but it seems like he could have benefitted from it. What is true greatness? We all want to be great, even if it is only to be the king of our own castle or cubicle. But who are our mentors, what kind of greatness are we pursuing? Are we growing in achievement or are we actually growing to be a great person? Through this message we’re going to see that to become truly great we must learn to suffer and to serve like Jesus.

First, to become great, we must accept God’s will above our own will (32-34).

Verse 32 begins, “They were on their way up to Jerusalem...” This marks a turning point in Mark’s Gospel. In the flow of Mark’s gospel Jesus had been avoiding Jerusalem as confrontations with the religious leaders grew. Immediately after this, when Jesus enters Jerusalem he is going to be crucified seven days later. Jesus had been sharing with his disciples that he would suffer many things, be rejected by the chief priests and elders and be killed—it had been building up for the weeks or months since the first prediction. Matthew says that after the second prediction they “were filled with grief” (Mt 17:23). And John tells us that the disciples were afraid he would die there because the Jews had tried to stone him twice (11:8,16; 10:31; 8:59).

Now Jesus was “leading the way” to Jerusalem. The word picture is of a commander who leads the charge into battle to spur on his frightened troops. Jesus did not hang back but actively embraced God’s will for him. This astonished the Twelve because they wanted a successful ministry, power and position and that meant avoiding suffering—let’s just move to Canada Jesus! How do you react when God’s will goes against your will? We can understand the tension here. Jesus was ready to do anything because he had accepted God’s will, while the Twelve were constantly confused because they could not let go of their own will.

So Jesus “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.’” This is now the third time that Jesus taught them about his suffering and death. If we compare the three, we see that each time his prediction becomes more precise and this last one is the exact account of what is about to happen. It shows that through prayer God had revealed his will to Jesus step by step. Once Jesus clearly knew the will of God, he was ready to obey. He didn’t do this with fatalistic resignation but he truly accepted that God’s will was best. In our key verse, verse 45, we see that he was a willing sacrifice—he wanted to give his life as a ransom to save all people. And in hindsight we can see, that though painful, accepting God’s will was clearly the best decision Jesus ever made.

Second, to be great we must share in Jesus’ sufferings (35-40).

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.’” Does it seem to you, like they didn’t hear a word that Jesus had just said? It’s happened every single time that Jesus has predicted his death. The first time Peter said “This will never happen to you.” After the second they begin arguing along the road about which of them was the greatest. There’s a reason for this. The clue is right after this in chapter 11. Where the people go crazy to welcome him to Jerusalem as king waving palm branches and shouting “save us, save us!” (11:8-9). In their minds, at Jerusalem Jesus was going to establish an earthly kingdom and they would finally get positions of power. They’re at a total impasse—it’s prosperity gospel meets true gospel. So, they come to Jesus and ask for

the seats at his right and left in his glory. Now it's interesting to note that Jesus already promised them that when he sits on his glorious throne, they also would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28). However, these two wanted to be at the top of the top positions. Jesus points out in verse 43 their desire was to rule over the other ten disciples—which is of course why the others are indignant later! They were quite sneaky and ambitious. They had watched many people come to Jesus, so they carefully worded their request: 1. get Jesus' promise, 2. know what you want, 3. request it boldly, 4. don't give up—I mean you have to admire their faith and boldness. Jesus understood James and John. He didn't rebuke the human ambition of his young disciples, he worked with it, he redirected it and educated them.

He said, ““You don't know what you are asking...Can you drink the cup I am going to drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”” They imagined that leadership in God's kingdom, was similar to the world—that you have to impress others and get appointed. Through some deductive reasoning some even think that James and John may have been first cousins of Jesus¹—so there could even be some nepotism here. But Jesus tells them that's not how things work in the kingdom. Then he shares a rather significant truth with them: to be given the greatest spots in God's kingdom a person must drink the cup that he drank and be baptized with the baptism that he was baptized with. The cup, we see in the Garden of Gethsemane, was God's full will for him to suffer to the fullest extent, so that he could save all those who believe in him (14:36). In the same way, baptism in the New Testament represents joining with Jesus in his death. The image is of being submerged in suffering washing over every part of your being (Lk 12:50). I think it is very noteworthy that the requirement of the place of greatest honor in God's kingdom was not any of the usual quantifiable measures of success. The one who will sit at Jesus' right hand will not be the one with the biggest church, the most success, or who worked the hardest but the ones who suffered with Jesus. In Revelation, we see that only one was worthy, the hosts of heaven sang to Jesus, “You are worthy...because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation...Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

¹ The argument goes that each of the Gospels (Mt, Mk, Jn) portrays 3 women with Mary near the cross and assumes that each Gospel is portraying the same 3 women (2 Mary's and a 3rd). Matthew says the mother of Zebedee's sons (Mt 27:56). Mark says Salome (Mk 15:40). John says his mother's sister (Jn 19:25) and that John out of humility would have purposely downplayed their human connection and not named his own mother by name. The argument is inconclusive and has detractors but there's a strong deductive argument to be made.

Jesus invited James and John, that if they truly want to be great in God's sight, to come share in his suffering and death. Jesus also invites each of us. This is a basic part of a Christian worldview: that anyone who believes in Jesus, must be ready to suffer with him for the sake of the gospel and even to lose our life (8:34-38). For 1st century converts and in many countries even today, one of the questions they must consider at baptism is "Are you willing to die for Jesus if God wills it?" It is unlikely that God will call any of us here in America to lose our life for the sake of Jesus but are you willing?

Well, I'm sure that James and John had no idea in their human ambition what they were agreeing to, but they said "We can." Jesus approved of their words saying that they would share in his cup and baptism. In fact, James was the first of the Apostles to be martyred (Acts 12:2). Foxe's Book of Martyrs recounts that at James' trial the man who brought charges against him was deeply moved by his behavior and continence. And James was so filled with the Spirit on the way to his execution, that the man who accused him made a confession of faith in Christ and he and James were beheaded together in 36 AD. After that, one by one each of the Apostles was martyred for their faith. The last one alive was John and legend has it that he was baptized in boiling oil. When that did not kill him, he was sent to an island prison for the rest of his life. Jesus said that honor doesn't come from being given a human position but will be granted by God in heaven, to those who suffer with him (40).

Third, true greatness is not positional but to grow in Jesus' character (41-45).

Well, as we've already said, the other ten disciples were indignant with James and John but they all clearly wanted to do the same thing (9:34-35). So, Jesus took this as a teachable moment to help them to understand worldly greatness vs true greatness and therefore the reason he was going to the cross. Look at verse 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. Not so with you.'" Worldly authority is positional authority: it is authoritarian. A person is "regarded" as a leader because they have a title, that comes with a specified authority, regardless of whether they are actually RESPECTED as a leader. "Lord it over" means to make people feel they are beneath us. Authoritarian leaders are very concerned with making sure their subordinates know they are below them. They accomplish their goals by exercising authority downwardly or some translations say "tyrannizing" those under them. Jesus says, "not so" for his disciples.

“Instead,” he says, “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (43). This isn’t just spiritual truth, even the business world has realized Jesus’ wisdom. They found that authoritarian leadership produces lesser results because it stops people from honestly sharing their opinion when they feel it may offend the leadership of the one in authority. One study found that in 25% of flight simulations, critical errors were not corrected by the crew, out of fear of challenging the pilot’s authority.² More and more the business world is moving to latticed team leadership, leadership without authority, where those in a leadership ROLE **earn** the respect of their team. This resembles the early church. Leadership among the early church was not hierarchical but flat. People were given roles but a leadership **role** was an opportunity to serve, not exercise authority—which is why Paul calls it a “noble task” (1 Ti 3:1). When people see that their leaders serve them, they are willing practice mutual submission. Peter in describing the role of an elder doesn’t say, “I’m an Apostle, I’m the top leader do what I say!” He says “I **appeal** to you as a fellow elder” to willing take the role of being a **shepherd** for the sheep, not to get something in return but with an **eagerness to serve** (1 Pe 5:1-2). In fact, Paul said that the requirement of any leader in the church, is that they should already have a long established record of serving, of living an impeccable life and when they teach, people listen (1 Ti 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). In other words their title does not give them greatness, they are already great. Jesus is saying, don’t seek titles but grow in character from the inside out. And the way to do that is to serve. Those who serve are **truly great**.

One great example that I’ve seen of this is M. Isaac Choi. He refused to be known as CBF leader but said his title is “serving servant.” When I was young and foolish I thought that he should exercise his authority more and thought I could do a better job. But as I took on leadership I came to greatly respect him. He has tirelessly traveled the world serving and caring for families out of desire to serve the least of these. As a result, families all over the world were influenced to engage in family discipleship. I realized that the role of leader is not to make others accomplish my vision but to be a servant to families to equip them to accomplish GOD’S vision for their family.

Jesus goes on to say that “whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all.” A slave is someone who was captured or forced into slavery because of their debt. Because

² <https://resources.hrsg.ca/blog/can-you-have-leadership-without-authority>

they have no rights, they can never think of what they want, their only thought is to do what will bring the greatest good to their master. Jesus says that the one who wants to be first, that is anyone who wants to be in the top position of leadership, must in fact become a slave to everyone thinking always of the good of others and not ourselves. In ourselves, this is impossible. Each of us has a limitation—no matter how noble our ideals—of who we will and who we absolutely will NOT serve. To do this we must look at Jesus.

Verse 45 begins “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’ example was that he had the greatest title and position “the Son of Man.” This title for the Jesus was prophesied by Daniel who said, “there before me was one like a *son of man*, coming with the clouds of heaven...He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Da 7:13-14). Jesus is the one who truly deserves to say “I’m above you,” and “I have the right to exercise authority over you” but “even the Son of Man” did not come to be served but he served everyone. Jesus believed that his authority was meant to be used in serving others. Jesus served from early morning to late night. He was a doctor, a counselor, a teacher, a priest. He embraced lepers, ate with the dregs of society, patiently helped the insane, calmly bore with other’s weaknesses, and allowed himself to be betrayed and condemned.

Ultimately, Jesus came “to give his life as a ransom for many.” A ransom is a price that is paid to free a slave or a captive. Each of us when we sin, becomes a slave of our sin, incapable of freeing ourselves from sin’s slavery. What is more, just as we feel that a just God MUST punish pedophiles and dictators, we know in our heart that a just God must also punish US for rebelling against our king who created us and gave us our very life and every good thing we see, and experience. Yet, even if we were to be tortured and die for our sin, it could not satisfy the debt of justice owed. The only one who could pay the eternal debt owed to God, was God himself. It was a ransom paid by God to God. Jesus suffered excruciating torture until the Bible says he was disfigured beyond human likeness. He was betrayed, mocked and humiliated to the highest degree. And what is more he bore the horrible weight of the sin of all people of all time—who could possibly bear such a weight!—until he was separated from God and judged by the full force of God’s fury against sin. And Jesus bore it all! When he died he said, “it is finished.” Through the ransom that Jesus paid there is no debt outstanding for sin. Anyone, who believes in Jesus, is joined with him. His

sacrifice is now our sacrifice, his perfection is now our perfection. Jesus made himself the slave of all to accomplish the greatest good of anyone in history. And he calls all of us to accept this ransom and be set free.

Fouth, greatness in practice (46-52).

So as we go to the last part of the passage, we see that as Jesus was leaving Jericho, there was a blind beggar crying out to Jesus for mercy. Now he was BLIND, surely the people of the town were like “wow I want to see Jesus heal this blind man, shout louder make some room for him!” No they told him, “shut up.” Harsh. Why did they do this? Because he was a beggar, he was a homeless person. And when a homeless person is making a scene, asking for something we tell them to be quiet, go away, even we don’t make eye contact with them. Somehow we think they are not human, that we are above them and so we exercise downward authority towards them.

An example of this that we can see in our society is the Black Lives Matter movement or more broadly the social justice movement. Over the past year I spent a lot of time educating myself, as I’m sure many of us have. At first, honestly, I didn’t get it and thought people are just blaming others instead of taking personal responsibility for their own actions. But then one day I realized, that every time I heard about a black kid shot by police I didn’t care. In my heart I had a bias, “well, they’re probably in a gang, probably doing drugs, probably deserved it.” But when I heard about the same thing happening to a “white” kid—I use that term broadly—I was shocked and wondered how such a thing could happen. And I got it, that’s wrong—a Black Life Matters. What is more I realized that if you took the same kid raised him in an affluent neighborhood with even the privileges I had in a poor family he would turn out completely different—it’s NOT his fault. The core of the issue is do I realize that each life matters to God? Another example is one man Devonte, who you may have seen sleeping on the porch of P. Kevin. He’s constantly drunk and so he couldn’t hold down a job and therefore couldn’t find a place to live. I hate alcoholism because of my family history; so, I thought “he made his own bed now he should sleep in it, if he dies, he dies it’s his own fault.” But even Devonte is made in the image of God. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for Devonte. In Matthew 18, it describes this ransom as being like 10,000 bags of gold—something like the size of this entire church building in solid gold. Jesus assigns this value to each person—each person is treasured! And Jesus calls me to be the slave of all—all includes Devonte.

But even though I know this in my head and I see clearly what the Bible teaches, honestly I cannot love him. My heart just simply does not have the ability to love people like that. But I realize through Jesus' example that Jesus wants to serve him through me and so I pray. I've experienced several times in my life that God brought me a person to serve who I naturally wanted to hate or write off, but I prayed because I recognized that God had brought them to me. In prayer God showed me that he loved them and forgave them and wanted to serve them and then a supernatural love came into my heart and suddenly I found I loved them. I've never experienced that becoming a Christian just immediately changes your heart to have charity for all people. Rather, I believe we struggle each time to ask God to give us HIS love so that HE can serve that person through us.

Again what was Jesus' example? Jesus stopped. Jesus noticed him. Jesus called him and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" giving the same privilege to the beggar as to James and John. The king deigned to make himself the servant of a beggar. He healed his blindness and the blind beggar began to follow Jesus. And you know this man has a name: Bartimaeus. Do you know why we know his name? Whenever someone's name is given it is because the original readers knew the person, it is because Bartimaeus became a disciple of Jesus! One act of kindness to a seemingly worthless person, transformed him into a great and useful man for God's kingdom and his society.

Mark 10:45 is the key verse of all Mark's gospel. Why? When we look at Mark we see that he includes less details and teaching in order to emphasize Jesus' serving. We also see the strong emphasis on discipleship and specifically what qualities and attitude he wants a disciple to have. We see that ultimately what Jesus wants from his disciples is that we may grow as servants and give our lives for the salvation of many. I believe that all of us can become the greatest men and women as we grow to be like the greatest one Jesus. Amen.