

Power, Position, and Suffering -- Mark 10:32-45

by Travis Dean

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

Lord, we are about to open Your Word. It contains everything we will ever need - power, love, wisdom, healing, and comfort. May those who feel weak today leave here empowered. May the empty be filled. May the confused and discouraged be enlightened and encouraged. May those suffering leave here comforted and healed. In Jesus' name, amen.

How many people here are in leadership? It might be at home, at work, or in the church. Whatever your different roles might be, at least someone looks to you as their leader. Please raise your hand if you fall into this category. I don't recall ever waking up one morning and saying, "I want to be in leadership," or "I want to have authority over people." And yet, simply by giving the sermon today, I find myself in a leadership role. Simply by being a father, I find myself in a leadership position.

The individuals in our story today were all leaders. They had different ideas of what it meant to be a leader, but they all had some type of leadership. Some of them were hungry for more authority than what they already had. Jesus had it all – power, position, authority. But He also chose this – suffering. To be a follower of Jesus Christ you, too, will have all of these – power, position, and suffering.

Let's now consider a summary of our story today:

While Jesus and His disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, He again told them of His approaching death and resurrection. Later, James and John came to Him asking for the highest places in His kingdom of glory. Jesus told them that before they could sit with Him on His throne they must first follow Him in His sufferings and death. James and John's request caused the other disciples to be very displeased with them. Jesus reminded them that as His followers leadership was not about using control and force, but it was about serving and sacrificing for others.

Let's now consider what Jesus experienced in this story. We will be looking at Mark 10:32-45, and I would encourage you to follow along in your own Bibles as we go along. If you did not bring a Bible with you, there should be a pew Bible in front of you. This story is found on page 894 in your pew Bibles.

First of all, Jesus experienced heading towards Jerusalem. Mark 10:32 mentions that Jesus and His disciples were on the road going "up to Jerusalem". The expression "up to Jerusalem" is significant for a couple reasons. First of all, Jesus and His disciples were most likely at this time in the valley of the Jordan River. In fact, in the story that follows this one, Jesus will arrive in Jericho, which was right near the shores of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. So it's very likely that the elevation of the region where Jesus was in today's story is close to 1,000 feet below sea level. The city of Jerusalem, however, is approximately 2,500 feet above sea level. So, in this sense, going "up to Jerusalem" is significant. But going up to Jerusalem also has significance in that this city was the seat of authority in Israel. This was where the temple was located, which was the center of Jewish worship. Jerusalem was also the capital of the nation of Israel.

Mark 10:32 also mentions that Jesus was "going before them". He was walking ahead of them. There was another story we looked at earlier in the book of Mark where this was also the case. Jesus' disciples were lagging behind in this past story, arguing about who was going to be the greatest in Jesus' kingdom of glory. In today's story it seems that they were lagging behind more out of fear. In fact, Mark says, "they were afraid". To them, going to Jerusalem was like entering a bee hive. This was the headquarters of Jesus' enemies, the scribes and Pharisees. Mark also says the disciples were amazed. It's as if they couldn't believe how determined Jesus was to go to Jerusalem. He had been avoiding the entire region of Judea, for the most part, for the last couple years. But now He was on a mission. He knew His time had come. His final Passover was only a couple weeks away.

Second, Jesus experienced predicting His own death and resurrection. Jesus responded to His disciples fear and amazement by calling them aside. And He explained to them in great detail His own immediate future. This is, in fact, the third time Jesus had done this, as recorded by Mark (The other two incidents are recorded in Mark 8:31; 9:31). In this instance, however, He was much more descriptive. He gave more details in today's story than He did on the two previous ones, combined. In fact, He gave eight specific descriptions. And, remarkably, the fulfillment of all eight are recorded in the book of Mark. The first description Jesus gave the disciples of His own future was that He would be delivered to the chief priests and to the scribes. The word translated, "delivered to" is also translated, "betrayed". Clearly Jesus is predicting Judas' betrayal. And Mark 14:43-46 describes this very thing taking place. Second, Jesus predicted that the chief priests and the scribes would "condemn Him to death". That is exactly what happens in Mark 14:64. Third, Jesus predicted that the chief priests and the scribes would "deliver Him to the Gentiles". Jesus knew that the Jews would hand Him over to the Romans. Mark 15:1 reveals that this is exactly what happened. Fourth, Jesus predicted that the Romans would "mock Him". This is exactly what they do in Mark 15:17-20. Fifth, Jesus predicted that the Romans would "scourge Him". This was a punishment inflicted with a Roman whip or flagellum. It was very brutal and painful. And Mark 15:15 describes them as doing this very thing to Jesus. Sixth, Jesus predicted that they would "spit on Him". Mark 15:19 records the exact fulfillment. Seventh, Jesus predicted that the Romans would "kill Him". Jesus knew He would die at the hand of the Romans, not the Jews. The Jews would have stoned Him. But the Romans' method of inflicting the death penalty was crucifixion. And so Mark records that this is what happened in Mark 15:22-37. Last of all, Jesus predicted that He would "rise again". Perhaps this is the most amazing prediction of all. And Mark records in chapter 16:1-9 that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead.

Third, Jesus experienced a request for greatness. It seems that Mark has recorded this experience to illustrate how, as on the two previous occasions, Jesus' words had no apparent effect on the disciples. In Mark 10:35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus. They seem a bit presumptuous in their request. And yet they may have felt justified in their request. Many scholars suppose that James and John may have been Jesus' cousins. Their mothers might have been sisters. In fact, in Matthew's account, James and John's mother was the one who opened up the conversation. She then stepped back and let her sons continue. It gives the idea that she had a significant influence on Jesus. I find it interesting James and John they addressed Jesus as "Teacher", and not "Lord". The rich, young ruler in our previous story did better than that by addressing Him as, "Good Teacher". James and John wanted Jesus to do whatever they asked for. They elicited an affirmative response before proceeding with their request. In Mark 10:36 Jesus didn't rebuke them for their bold request. He could have gotten quite upset with them - "I have just told you about My own imminent sufferings and death, and all you can think about is your own promotions?!" Jesus remained calm, and yet He didn't give them a guarantee either, like, "Oh, yeah, sure, whatever you want. Just ask!" No, He responded with a simple, courteous question - "What do you want Me to do for you?"

In Mark 10:37 James and John responded with their request - "Grant us, that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." They wanted the two highest positions in the kingdom they were hopeful (in spite of their fears) that Jesus was about to set up in Jerusalem. Clearly, they didn't want to talk about the sufferings and death Jesus had just predicted. They only wanted to think about His coming glory. And they wanted to make sure that they had first dibs on the two highest positions in that new kingdom. In Mark 10:38 Jesus responded by stating that they didn't not know what they were asking for. To be with Him in His glory required being with Him now and experiencing what He was about to experience - suffering and death. Jesus then asked them if they could drink from His cup and be baptized with Him. What did He mean by this? It is unlikely that Jesus was holding a cup with some loathsome liquid that James and John would be hesitant to drink from. And it would have been impossible for them to have been baptized with Jesus in the Jordan River, as all three of them had already been baptized there. So what did Jesus mean by drinking from His cup? John himself gives us a clue in his gospel account. In John 18:11 Jesus and His disciples are in the garden of Gethsemane. The chief priests, Pharisees, and their soldiers had come, led by Judas, to arrest Jesus. Peter tried to put up a fight and ended up cutting off a guy's ear. Jesus responded by saying, "Shall I not drink the cup, which My Father has given Me?" It wasn't a literal cup with water or wine. It was a metaphorical cup that was filled with suffering. Well, what about this baptism? In Romans 6:3 being baptized with Jesus is compared to experiencing His death. So, Jesus was telling James and John in a round-

about way, that if they wanted a special part in His glory, they first would have to experience His sufferings and death.

Well, James and John were quick to respond. It was a sort of ignorant confidence. They didn't really know what He was talking about, but they just said, "Sure, whatever it takes. We can handle it." In Mark 10:39 Jesus assured them that they would experience His suffering and death." It seems quite significant that James was the first of the twelve disciples to be killed for being a follower of Jesus. And it is believed that John was the last disciple to die, which means he would have suffered the most. In Mark 10:40 Jesus explained that what they really wanted was not something that could be arbitrarily assigned. Those who will be closest to Jesus in heaven will be there because of what they experienced on earth. In Revelation 3:21 Jesus declared, "To him who overcomes will I grant to sit with Me on My throne." Those who are the closest to Jesus now will be the closest to Him in heaven.

Last of all, Jesus experienced contrasting two types of leadership. Mark 10:41 shows the response of the other ten disciples when they discovered what James and John had requested. They were "greatly displeased". They all felt slighted and unappreciated. Once again, as it seems had happened so often before, the disciples began to engage in a controversy among themselves. They began trying to put each other in their "proper" place. Once again Jesus called them together. And in verses 42-45 He contrasts two types of leadership. First, He refers to "the Gentiles". This is a term that is used in Scripture to refer to anyone who was not a Jew, and is more literally translated "nations". Jesus described their leaders as people who "lord it over" and who "exercise authority". These expressions give the picture of a leadership style that uses control and force. Authority is brought from the top down. It's hierarchical. Jesus then stated in Mark 10:43 that the style of leadership among His followers is much different.

Jesus didn't try to discourage His disciples from pursuing greatness, authority, or a position in leadership. Instead He explained to them what it means to be a leader in His kingdom. In Mark 10:43, 44 He stated, "Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all." A servant was someone equivalent to a waiter at a restaurant, a flight attendant or a water boy. A slave, however, was someone who had no rights. Their time, energy, and dignity all belonged to their owners. Jesus pictured the most extreme case in saying, "slave of all". "All" means there is no limit or boundaries. You can't go anywhere on this earth and be a free man. Wherever you go, you spend your life giving all you are and all you have for your Master in heaven. In serving Him, you become the servant of all His children, the entire human race.

Jesus concluded in Mark 10:45 by calling their attention to Himself as their Example. He said, in effect, "As your Leader, I did not come here to force people to serve Me. I came here to devote My entire life to serving those in need. One day soon I will lay down My life as a price paid for their freedom." Jesus modeled in His own life the type of leadership that is found in heaven.

Now that we have considered what Jesus experienced in this story, let us now apply this to our own lives. How does this story effect how we live as Christians? Jesus is revealed in this story as our Example. He shows us what it means to be a healthy Christian. The first way in which He is revealed as our Example is in that He remained aware of His disciples' needs. Jesus was fast approaching His own death. He is placing His feet in the path to Jerusalem that will culminate in His own crucifixion. And yet we find Him concerned, not for Himself, but for His disciples. In Mark 10:32 He is giving at least His third attempt to make His disciples aware of what is coming. He tries to prepare them for their Great Disappointment. He makes another impressive effort to calm their fears and open their eyes to their immediate future. Then in Mark 10:36-40 He shows incredible chivalry in responding to James and John's request for greatness. He was not upset by their selfish request. He remained surprisingly objective and kind. He gave them a very revealing and thorough answer. He didn't blow them off or minimize the importance of their request. Then in Mark 10:41-45, in response to the disciples' arguing and heated quarreling, He once again was very patient. He took the time to educate and enlighten them. He did not rebuke. He said, "Hey, anyone can be a leader. All of you can be great, if you want to. Let me show you how it works with us."

And so He reveals that a healthy Christian is someone whose heart is free from self-centeredness. It's someone who is filled with patience. How often the opposite is true of us. We are filled with self-centeredness and free from patience. And yet being self-centered is a very miserable way to live. I'm just beginning to realize how true this is. And to be free from self-centeredness and filled with patience is so liberating.

My wife and I have been reading through a parenting book entitled, Raising Godly Tomatoes by Elizabeth Krueger. Near the end of the book she shares some from her own experience. In the book she comes across as someone very self-controlled, giving, and unselfish. And yet she shares how her life used to be before God came in and opened up to her a whole new way of living. She describes how she used to be very easily frustrated. Things were often bordering on chaos and her frustrations were often near the explosion point. Even after a healthier way to respond when her children misbehaved, she still was easily annoyed and irritated by other things in life. And this had a noticeably negative effect on her entire family.

She would get all bent out of shape over an accidental spill or a dropped can of soup. She'd yell, "Shoot!", almost before the can hit the floor. Her anger then would swell up inside of her and then she'd start complaining to herself by thinking, "Life is so rough," and "Why is it always me?" and "Why can't anything ever go right?" and so on. Sometimes her anger would spill over on to her children. This would usually be followed by feelings of embarrassment tears as she felt guilty for losing her temper, snapping at her innocent children, and thinking such selfish, ungrateful thoughts. Finally she would end this emotional ordeal in a state of depression by beating herself up for being a complete and total failure as a Christian, a wife, a mother, and even a person. She would repent in dust and ashes and pray that it would never happen again, but, of course it would, and the cycle repeated itself again and again.

Then she decided to view her irritability as an extremely serious sin, not just an unfortunate personality flaw. She decided to view losing her temper as totally unacceptable and completely forbidden. Instead of seeking to "improve", she determined to "quit". She changed to viewing anger as poison, not just as a small bothersome bad habit. It made a big difference. She determined that anger or irritation was NOT AN OPTION, period. Her resolve was to be alert and ready, not passively doing nothing until sin was knocking at the door. She told herself, "I will NOT become angry!" When something happened that typically irritated her, she would say, "This is NOT something to get upset about", and "I will deal this some other way".

Within six months, she experienced victory and freedom. She was released from the burden of self-centered living. And she describes it as "glorious".

Notice this testimony: "Last week I was opening the lid on my chili at Wendy's and splashed chili all over my blouse. What was my reaction? Well fifteen or twenty years ago I would have been flushed with anger and irritation and filled with a "Why me?" attitude. This time none of that even crossed my mind. It really did not occur to me to be angry. Instead, my mind analyzed the situation and dealt with it: "Hmmm, those are really large spots. Not attractive at all. Good thing we're on our way home. I wonder what the best way to get this off is. I wonder what I would have done if this had happened on our way out to that meeting. I wonder if I would have tried to wash it out in the rest room or what. I'm sure glad it happened now instead." Actually, it was almost amusing the way I silently thought through the whole scenario without really reacting emotionally at all. How wonderful this new spirit is!"

This is the spirit of Jesus Christ. This is the attitude He reveals in our story. And it is the experience of a healthy Christian. What a glorious freedom it is!

A second way in which Jesus is revealed in this story as our Example is that He equated greatness with character, not power. Jesus never discouraged His disciples' desire to be someone great. He actually seems to encourage them to pursue greatness. He showed that attaining greatness depended more on their choices than on His. He explained to them in Mark 10:40 that to be on his left or right hand on His throne of glory was not something He could arbitrarily assign. That right and privilege is based on one's experience and character.

And so He reveals that a healthy Christian is someone who pursues a great character. I'm more and more convinced that character development is far too under-rated. I remember when I was in business for myself as a carpenter. I worked so hard to build up the business and to get more and more efficient with each new job that I did. But with each job it seemed that there was always something that slowed me down. While I was trying to build my business, God was trying to build my character. That created some frustrating experiences. But I am starting to realize how valuable great character is. Because when it's all said and done, character is the only thing you'll be able to keep. It's the only thing you will be able to take with you when you leave this world. And maybe it will qualify you to be one of those privileged ones who will get to sit next to Jesus on His throne. Either way, your joy in heaven will be in proportion to your character, not to how many stars you have in your crown. Ask God to give you a great character. It's the most valuable possession you could ever have.

So, where are you in this story? As I have considered the events recorded here, the response of the other ten disciples to James and John's request has seemed quite interesting. Why were they so upset with James and John's request? Maybe some of them felt like stomping off, yelling, "Fine! I didn't really want to be a part of this group anyway!" But behind that anger, there were hurt feelings. They felt unappreciated. There have been times in my life when I have felt the same way. I think we all have. But I wonder what would happen if we got so consumed with helping people in need that we didn't have time to stop and argue or to get our feelings hurt?

Our closing hymn is "My Jesus I Love Thee". The first verse states, "My Jesus I love Thee, I know Thou art mine. For Thee all the follies of sin I resign." It's time to stop the silliness in my life. I don't want to take part in any more self-centered pity parties. I want to be a true follower of my Lord, who sacrificed everything to set others free. I want to live my life investing in others. How about you?