



On My Way Down to the Top

Mark 10:35-45

The story is told of two eagles that could both fly and soar. However, one flew higher and could fly faster than the other. One day the slower of the two came into contact with a hunter. He said to him I wish you would take your bow and arrow and shoot down that highflying eagle. The hunter said I would, but I need a feather for my arrow. The eagle gave him one of his feathers and the hunter shot, but the highflying eagle flew to high and fast. Over and over again the other eagle plucked his feathers to take down the high flying eagle, until the day came when the eagle had no more feathers left and the eagle that once could soar and fly simply could fly no more. Jealousy only hurts us. When we keep our eyes on others we miss that God has something special just for us. The others were indignant. They were angry with James and John. Jesus' response, do not worry about it. Don't worry about who is in charge, who is influence, who has the authority. Just focus on your own flight and you will be fine.

Fourthly, practice humility. Jesus says if you want to become the greatest, be the servant and be the slave. Jesus uses two words here that describe the attitudes we are to have. The first is servant, which is the word diakonoi where we get the word deacon. It was commonly used to describe those who waited on tables. It is a common term to describe others who are doing serving acts toward others. The second word is doulos. Which means slave or household servant. This servant had no possession, no rights, no life that was not given to him or her by the master. It is the picture of the lowliest place in economic life. Jesus says if you want to be great in the kingdom we have an attitude of the servant. There is nothing beneath us and serving others becomes our greatest goal.

Fifth, we must follow the example of Jesus. Jesus finishes by simply saying if you want to be the greatest become like Me. Follow the example of Jesus. Jesus says for I did not come to be served, but to serve and to give My life as a ransom for many. If there was anyone who deserved praise and service it is Jesus. Jesus is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, but He humbled Himself and became a servant. Jesus, the one who deserves service, became the servant. So much so that His life becomes and acts of service toward all people. Jesus gives His life totally as a

ransom for many. Jesus paid the price for our sin on the cross. The debt we owed that we could not pay because of our sin... is paid in full because Jesus became the servant.

If we want to find our way down to the top we follow Jesus. Jesus has already shown us the way.

I want to close by saying that Jesus wants us to listen to this story. It is interesting that Mark places this event, as do the other writers, right after Jesus has been talking about His pending death. Jesus has been trying to teach the disciples that the Kingdom of God is not what they think. It was not going to end politically or with power, but with the cross and death. Jesus has just told them what is going to happen to Him and it is as though the disciples are not listening. When James and John make their request and it causes this division, notice what Jesus does. He calls them together. He wants them to get this. They are missing the point. They have not been listening.

In my imagination today, I can picture Jesus calling us to Him. I can imagine Jesus saying everyone come here for a moment. Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. I need you to understand something. You are missing the point. This life is not all about getting to the top. It is not about getting noticed, having the right network and calling in favors. That is how the world acts. But in the kingdom of God the priorities are different. We live by grace, we live faithfully, we rid ourselves of jealousy, practice humility and most importantly... we follow the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is the cross. The way to the top is all the way down to the cross.

Get it?



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If you were going to give advice to your child about how to make it in the world of business or for that matter, how to be successful in the world, what would be some of your suggestions? We might tell them to "get noticed." You have to get noticed to move up the ladder of success in this world. This is true whether you are auditioning for a play, trying out for a ball team, going to an interview or applying to college. You have to get noticed. How do you stand out from all the others? Maybe it is the way your dress. You know the saying, don't dress for the job you have but for the one you want. You have heard the old joke about the woman who took that advice and spent the day in HR in her Batwoman costume. We are to dress for success. We must get noticed.

The second tidbit of advice might be to make connections. It is all who you know. There is a lot of truth to that one. When we are looking for jobs, internships, or even a doctor... it is all who you know. Who do you know, who knows you? We spend a lot of time going to social gatherings, chatting up those who are influential, and making connections. There is no doubt that part of anyone's success in almost any field is making connections with others.

The third suggestion might be to call in favors. There comes a time when you have been noticed and when you have made the right connections that you finally do the big ask. There are all types of guidelines on how to make the sell, influence people, or get a raise. They all have to do with getting to the point you do the "big ask." Many times it is not the question you get asked, but who is asking the question and how they ask the question that makes the difference. So, there comes a time that if you have been working hard, you have made the right connections, you go the next step and ask. You call in

your favors.

Now let me say before we begin looking at our text this morning, all these things I have mentioned are not wrong. In fact, standing out, building relationships and learning how to make your desires known are actually good things. They definitely work in regards to success in business, school, church, and in general society. Now it goes without saying that you must add to these suggestions faithfulness, integrity, hard work and being a team player. These all make a successful person.

So we should not be surprised in our text when James and John come to Jesus to do the big ask in Mark 10. They are simply doing what everyone does. They are simply getting noticed, using their connections and doing the big ask. We are told that James and John, these two fishing brothers, approach Jesus and ask Him this question.

What do we know about James and John? They were brothers who were sons of Zebedee. It is interesting how many times that James and John are referred to as the sons of Zebedee. Scholars suggest that the fact that Zebedee is mentioned so frequently may indicate that he was well known. He may have been a very successful businessman. Interestingly, we also know that James and John had left their father's business to follow Jesus, but they were not the only ones in the family to leave and follow Jesus.

James and John's mother also was among the women who were following Jesus and who were supporting His ministry. What we have in the life of James and John and their family was a family in full support of Jesus. Three members of the family had chosen to follow Jesus from town to town. Many scholars believe that Salome is the woman referred to as the mother of James and John.

The family of Zebedee was fully on board. They are the picture of the family that is totally devoted to Jesus. They have left home; they are giving of their resources and their very lives to Jesus' mission.

James and John are also part of the inner circle of Jesus. We know they are, along with Peter, the ones who are included in events where the other disciples are not included. There was something about these brothers who are also referred to as the "sons of thunder" that made them stand out among the rest.

James and John were following the script. They were two of the twelve that had been noticed. They stood out. It may have been their personalities, which obviously made them stand out. It could have been their faithfulness. It could have been their sense of devotion. They stood out. Jesus noticed them.

They had connections with Jesus. It is interesting that their mother also was with them. That is a great connection. Jesus must have been appreciative of this family's devotion.

They were ready now to call in the favors. Here in Mark, James and John approach Jesus and their approach is presumptive and very bold. They come to Jesus and they first say, "We want you to give us what we ask." I love that line because it is a set up line. It is exactly what we do when we are not ready to ask the questions, but we are setting someone up for the questions. Jesus, we want you to do for us whatever we ask. It is like you and I calling someone and saying are you busy on Saturday morning? That is not really the question that is the set up.

There is a question behind the question. In his book, *The Question Behind the Question*, John Miller suggests that there is always a question behind the question of why did this happen to me or whom can I blame. The question we need to be asking is how can I do a better job? How can I properly respond? In other words, there is always a better question than the blame question. Here there is a question behind the question.

The question is going to be about power and influence, but the set up is "we want you to do whatever we ask." As you know, in the other gospels it is recorded that James and John do not ask this question. In the other gospels it is James and John's mother, the one who has been financially supporting Jesus, who comes and asks of the favor for her sons. She comes to Jesus and says here is a favor I ask of you. In your kingdom give my son's a place of power

and prominence. Let one sit on Your right and on Your left.

James and John have done all three of secrets of success. They have been noticed. They have the right network and they are now calling in favors. How difficult it must have been for Jesus not to say a simple yes to James, John and their mother. Here is a family totally dedicated to Jesus' mission and their request sounds just about right in the way we view power, influence and success. Yet, Jesus' answer is what you ask is for only God the father to give. Jesus uses this as a teaching moment. Jesus wants all His disciples to know that in the Kingdom of God the priorities are different. The one who is the greatest is not the one who is served, but the one who is the servant. The one who is the greatest is not the one who calls in the favors, but the one who is doing for others. The one who is highly regarded in God's Kingdom does not use their authority to lord over others or to lift up self, but uses it to lift up others.

Now I want us to understand that being a success is not wrong. There is nothing wrong with having success, having influence and rising to the top. It is just that we should not imagine that this is God's priority. God is much more concerned with how we treat others on the way to the top. God is much more concerned on how we will use the salary increases from our raise we asked for. God is much more concerned if we are going to use our influence and power for the good of others. Are we building up those we work with, are we encouraging them? Are we people of integrity? There is nothing wrong with climbing to the top, but we just need to know that in God's kingdom the way to the top is a descent and not an ascent.

How do we become people who are on our way down to the top? Let me briefly suggest 5 things.

First, we make our way down to the top by realizing we live by grace. James and John seem to assume they have earned this place of power. They seem to assume that this is rightly theirs. Whether it is from their own family social standing or it is from their sense of closeness to Jesus. They make and assumption that this should be theirs. James, John and their mother assume they deserve this favor. Yet, Jesus says, "These places belong to those for whom they were prepared." What we receive is by grace. Those who live on their way down to the top know that life is a gift. We live by grace.

All we have is a gift from God. Our possessions do

not really belong to us. They are all going to rust, rot and fade away. They are going to be passed on to others. Most of them will end up in a landfill, or a storage bend, or a thrift store or a relative's attic. Those very things we have are really on loan to us in this life and we possess them as a gift of God's generosity. Our influence, our health, our work, and our position are all by God's grace. We are not deserving... it is not ours for the taking. God does not owe us anything nor does life owe us anything.

Jim Cymbal writes:

When I was growing up, I thought the greatest Christian must be the person who walks around with shoulders thrown back because of tremendous inner strength and power, quoting Scripture and letting everyone know he has arrived. I have since learned that the most mature believer is the one who is bent over, leaning most heavily on the Lord, and admitting his total inability to do anything without Christ. The greatest Christian is not the one who has achieved the most but rather the one who has received the most. God's grace, love and mercy flow through him abundantly because he walks in total dependence.

—Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 45.

What we have is a gift. The first step on the way down to the top is to live into the reality of grace.

The second rung on the way down to the top is living faithfully. Jesus says to James and John are you able to drink the cup I am going to drink and be baptized with the baptism I am going to receive? There are two images here that are a call to faithful living. The first is the cup. The image of the cup has the connotation of John and James sitting at the right and left and the cup that the host drinks from is then passed to them. They share it. The cup in Old Testament is sometimes the cup of joy but more times the cup of wrath. The cup that Jesus says they must share is one of wrath or trouble. The term baptism here also metaphorical. The term means to submerge. By the way, this is why we immerse when it comes to baptism as Baptists. That is what the word means. It means to submerge oneself completely and fully in the water. Here Jesus is using the term not in reference to a baptism but being submerged in trouble. The term is used to describe someone who is overwhelmed. They have

gone under in regards to circumstances.

Jesus says to James and John, can you live a life that is not filled with power but one filled with trouble and sometimes overwhelming trouble? Jesus is referring to the cross. He is asking James and John the question Jesus asks of us. "Do you want to follow me? Then take up your cross daily and follow." The only way to the top in the kingdom of God is by way of the cross. It is faithful living.

The story is told of a union soldier who was caught and arrested and tried for desertion.

He was scheduled to be executed when Abraham Lincoln reviewed his case and gave him a stay of execution. In fact, he also allowed him to go back serve again. This soldier was killed only a few days before the war ended. It sounds tragic and it is in many ways, but here was what is redeeming about the story. This young man when he was killed had one thing on his person. It was his letter from the President that had spared his life. In response to his life being saved he had given his life in faithfulness. He had never forgotten who had given him life.

In response to what Jesus has done for us on the cross our only response can be faithful living. We will drink the cup and go through the baptism with Jesus. We will pick up our cross and follow. We will live faithfully.

We will rid our lives of jealousy. The only way to the top in the kingdom is to rid us of the jealousy of others. We are told that when the others heard what James and John had requested, they became indignant with James and John. That is the Bible's way of saying very nicely that they were angry, frustrated, put out, down right mad at James and John. Many scholars have suggested that the reason they were upset with James and John is that they beat them to asking Jesus. They may have been indignant because they did not think of it first. However, it is also heartbreaking sometimes to watch others who you thought were part of the team all of a sudden break rank and try to gain an upper hand. We have all had it happen at work, on a team, at school and even in families. The result if jealousy.

The others were jealous of James and John. We cannot be filled with jealousy and envy if we want to be those who are on our way down to the top.

IF WE WANT TO FIND OUR WAY DOWN TO THE TOP WE FOLLOW JESUS. JESUS HAS ALREADY SHOWN US THE WAY.