

# The King's Servant-Leaders

## *The Servant King & the King's Servants: A Study in Mark 1-10* Sermon 12

Mark 10:35-45

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Imagine a publisher is re-issuing several bestselling leadership books, and you've been tasked to come up with the cover design. What might you choose? Here are some of the titles: *From Good to Great*; *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*; *How to Win Friends and Influence People*; *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done*.<sup>1</sup> The book titles speak of self-discipline, self-possession, efficiency, effectiveness, and, above all, the promise of success. That's why people buy them. So, what cover design would you offer to catch a reader's eye? Maybe a woman at her desk, looking poised and focused. Maybe a man scaling a mountain. Maybe an eagle soaring high over its prey.

I doubt many of us would choose the image Jesus does when, in Mark 10, he portrays his own picture of leadership. It happens during a scene you may be familiar with. In Mark 10:35-45, Jesus is headed to Jerusalem with his disciples. Along with teaching them about his own fate—that he will be taken, beaten, and crucified—he's tried to prepare them for their own. A servant is not above their master. If people reject Jesus, so too, they will reject his followers.

In the midst of this, two of his closest disciples—James and John—ask what seems to be an impossibly obtuse and embarrassingly shameless question: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (10:37). Next to Jesus, they want the most powerful leadership positions—think Vice President and Secretary of State. Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach the Twelve another lesson about leadership in his kingdom: it takes a model that turns the world's approach to leadership on its head:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (10:42-44).

And then Jesus closes with an image, a shocking illustration of what this leadership *looks like*:

**For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).**

This is the image of Jesus being crucified. That's what "giving his life as a ransom" points to. The cover design Jesus chooses to capture the essence of leadership is not the Rocky Balboa statue in Philadelphia—the victorious boxer standing strong and free, his arms lifted in the air. No. It's the picture of a defeated man, arms nailed to a beam, head slumped over, blood running down his side. "This is leadership," Jesus says, "Not to lead others to serve oneself, but to lay down one's life, to serve others."

Jesus' Kingdom will be built by servant-leaders who bear the image of a crucified King. To become such a leader, we must undergo a daily transformation that could be likened simply to a shift from *self* to *servant*. Our passage reveals to disciples three ways such a transformation unfolds.

## I. The Reorientation of the Heart

What's exposed in the request of James and John is their heart. Immediately prior to their request, Jesus has just foretold his own suffering for the third time:

See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise (10:33-34).

This is how James and John respond to Jesus' embrace of suffering, picking up at v 35:

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left,<sup>2</sup> in your glory" (10:35-37).

In Matthew's account, it's the mother of James and John who makes the request.<sup>3</sup> Either way, this is a family who sacrificed a lot to follow Jesus, and they want to be sure they'll be taken care of. The father, Zebedee, has a fishing business in Galilee. James and John, along with their mother, have left Zebedee

for the time being in order to follow Jesus. The family still expects Jesus to swiftly bring about a geo-political Kingdom. And Jesus has, just prior to this scene (as recorded by Matthew 19), foretold a time of rulership that involves the disciples:

Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28).

So, while their request is presumptuous and self-serving, it’s not altogether ridiculous. It does reveal that they suffer from an ongoing misunderstanding: They still do not grasp how the kingdom of God will work in the near future, not as a geo-political power, but as a spiritual reality, slowly, imperceptibly, changing the hearts of human beings.

But what’s being exposed here is more than a misunderstanding. It’s misguided motives. After nearly three years with Jesus, who models a life of radical service towards others, their self-seeking hearts suddenly are exposed.

We should not stand in judgement of James and John—or the other ten, who only moments ago had been “arguing with one another about who was the greatest” (9:34). This episode warns all of us that *we can do good things, for bad reasons.*

The shift from self to servant begins in the heart, deep in our motives. The great service-killer is self-seeking pride. And it can hide in the most unlikely places—such as in the heart of two of the greatest apostles (this is the John who wrote the Gospel of John, three Epistles, and Revelation!). We all should regularly undergo self-examination about our real motives. And our motives can be surprisingly hard to discern. We can so easily think we are working to serve God and others, when deep down, we are actually using God and others, to serve ourselves.

Here are two suggestions for reorienting your heart away from self and towards others:

- **Ask yourself probing questions:** *How do I react when people don’t notice the acts of service I do? How do I feel when no one thanks me for my service at church? Why do I want*

*to lead my small group? Am I willing to do the things at the office, or at home, or at church, that no one sees, and for which, no one says thank you?*

- **Pray service-oriented prayers:** In the morning, think of a few people you know you'll interact with: a spouse, kids, parents, schoolmates, co-workers. With specific people in your mind, pray, asking God to show you how He'd like you to serve them today. When you are doing this, you're less likely to be upset because they aren't meeting your needs—because you're focused on meeting theirs.

But this is the non-negotiable first step of becoming a servant-leader: the heart must be reoriented from the self to others.

## II. Embrace Costliness

Moving to verses 38-40, Jesus reveals a second element of servant-leadership: one must embrace costliness.

Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And 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, 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."

The positions in the kingdom, Jesus says, are not posts to be earned—they are foreordained by God. More to the point: those who want to lead in the kingdom, must embrace hardship.

- **The cup** was often an image of God's judgement or wrath in the Old Testament:

Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this **cup of the wine of wrath**, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it" (Jeremiah 25:15). Remember Jesus' Gethsemane prayer: And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this **cup** from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

- **The baptism** Jesus refers to here is his entrance into a life of suffering; he is immersed in it.

Jesus is reminding all of us that those who say “yes” to leadership in his Kingdom, are saying “yes” to a path that is not easy.

Our world is awash with books and curriculums on leadership strategy. There is much we can learn here about time management, efficiency, and how to motivate and manage effectively. But leadership within the Kingdom of God employs a different strategy, and it is quite counter-intuitive: God works through weakness, smallness, foolishness, and hardship.

Paul lays this out vividly in 1 Corinthians. He says that the message God gives us to share—the message of the cross—is deemed as foolish to the wise ones of the world (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). Then he says the people God chooses to share that message are themselves no shining examples of power and prestige:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.... (1 Corinthians 1:26-28).

Paul even says this strategy of God’s impacts him personally:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power... (1 Corinthians 2:1-4).

*Why does God work this way—through foolishness, weakness, fear, and trembling?* Paul gives us the answer:

I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and

of power so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.  
(1 Corinthians 2:3-5).

God's strategy is to leverage the areas of our weakness, fear, or suffering so that the Kingdom of God is built upon His power, not our own prestige.

Friends, expect serving God to be costly for you. But see in that costliness, strategy. Your experience of weakness helps you depend on God's power, instead of your own. It trains you to stop leaning on human resources and instead to draw from divine resources.

Third and finally: along with retuning our hearts towards others and embracing costliness for their sake, our passage points us in the direction of stirring up a new ambition.

### III. Cross-Shaped Ambition

Friedrich Nietzsche despised the central symbol of Christianity, a cross. To him, it spoke of passivity, weakness, and a lack of proper drive. It was "an enticing, intoxicating, overwhelming, and undermining power."<sup>4</sup> The cross was "the sign of a deadening, life-denying religion devoid of all energy and vitality."<sup>5</sup> For Nietzsche and others, to follow the way of the cross is to embrace weakness and passivity that's the antithesis of the strength humans must now assert.

But it seems that Jesus isn't calling for anything like the loss of ambition or strength. Rather, he's upping the challenge. In verses 42-45, Jesus compares leadership in his kingdom with leadership in the kingdoms of men. And the comparison actually shows Jesus' way as involving a greater passion, and a greater ambition:

And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."(10:41-45).

This passage is not devoid of desire. Rather, it shows desire redirected. Jesus models a new type of ambition: rather than being fueled by our own needs or the love of ourselves, the servant of God is fueled by the love of God.

**Jesus is remaking ambition: It is transformed from ambition rooted in *my* needs; to ambition rooted in *God's love*. From need-based-ambition to love-based-ambition.**

As we are touched by this love, it will inspire us to spread it. Like a fountain overflowing, those who are served by the love of Jesus, want to serve others for the sake of Jesus. The basic logic of these verses is this: Don't lead like the world does—out of selfish ambition or from insecure neediness. Rather, lead out of Jesus' own passion and sacrifice for you and others. Let Jesus' servant-leadership course through your veins, flowing from you towards others.

Consider what can happen when your servant-leadership is fueled by God's love. Imagine there is a difficult person in your life, with whom you interact daily. Maybe at work, school, or at home. Just the sound of their voice sets off negative emotions in your gut. How do you pivot towards serving *them*? Use the logic of vs. 44-45: Because Jesus—the infinitely great one—laid down his life for infinitely low ones (sinners), you can take a step towards serving this individual. To help, when you're thinking about them or interacting with them, picture, in your mind, a little hill beside their head. Picture Jesus carrying his cross up that hill, putting it in the ground, and climbing up on it. Picture him saying to you—*I've done this for them, I love them, now let my love for them move through you right now. Let my cross-shaped love touch them through your voice, your facial expressions, your hands.*

Let me close by noting how liberating this is. We live in a time when people have become increasingly sick with self-obsession. Questions of identity surround us; concerns about rights for self-expression surround us. We certainly don't want to see anyone oppressed. But there is a negative corollary to all this self-focus. It makes us sick.

*Don't you see the invitation from Jesus? Move from the self to the servant.* Instead of asking what others think about you, what others owe you, or what others should do for you—instead, ask what you can do for them. And even, to your own hurt. Servanthood is doing others temporal and eternal good out of love, even when it is costly to us. Let us be a community where we seek to lead not serve ourselves. But, where we are led by God, so we can better serve others.

Let me close with a story. A family recently shared with me their experience fostering a young child. It was scary to open up their home—and it turned out to be a joy to have this little child. But when the time came for the child to go back to be with their biological family, the fostering family was caught off guard by how painful it was to say goodbye. They realized that God had asked them to undergo an act of servanthood that *hurt*—it wounded their hearts. I thought to myself, *this is a beautiful thing and just how the Kingdom of God works. In that emotional pain, this family is being tutored to lean upon God's love all the more, rather than their own strength.*

But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

(Mark 10:43-44)

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## Endnotes

1. "The 25 Best Leadership Books of All Time" <https://www.summary.com/magazine/the-25-best-leadership-books-of-all-time/> (Accessed December 10, 2022)
2. The perceptive reader of Mark will not overlook the irony that although James and John requested privileged positions on Jesus' "right" and "left," when Jesus is crucified, it will be two rebels, ἓνα ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ ἓνα ἐξ ἐναντιῶν αὐτοῦ, "one on his right and one on his left," not the disciples, that will join him (Mark 15:27). See Craig A Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, WBC 34B (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 118.
3. "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something... 'Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.'" (Matthew 20:20-21).
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (Random House, 1992), 471.

5. Graham Tomlin, *Looking through the Cross* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014), 133.