

Downward Mobility

The Rev. Dr. Peter
G. James

Mark 10:32-45

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

***Pedestals are
made for
statues, not
people.***

I am a sports enthusiast. I play sports; I watch sports. At this time every year, I am afflicted with a malady called March Madness.

It would hardly surprise you that most of my boyhood heroes were athletes. I was heartbroken when Mickey Mantle and Jim Brown fell from their pedestals. I felt a sense of personal betrayal, like the day I was told there was no Santa Claus.

We want our heroes to be pure and unsullied. But pedestals are made for statues, not people. Our beatified American heroes cannot withstand such rigorous scrutiny. In a span of the last several decades, we have watched the mighty fall, as reports surface about the alleged sexual dalliances of such notables as FDR, JFK, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thomas Jefferson.

I'm often asked the question, can I trust the Bible? Did Jesus really cast out demons and raise people from the dead? One of the reasons I believe the Bible is on account of the way it portrays its heroes. Our Biblical heroes have feet of clay. There's no attempt to airbrush sin from the record. Their vices and virtues are put prominently on display.

We've been preaching our way through the gospel of Mark. Mark was written by John Mark, who received first-hand information about Jesus from his association with the Apostle Peter. Mark's gospel is, in actuality, Peter's gospel, an early memoir of Peter.

If I were a gospel writer recording my life with Jesus, I might be tempted to portray myself in a more favorable light. There is none of that in Mark's gospel. There is no attempt to make Peter look good. He comes off as impetuous, headstrong and rather clueless about Jesus. He goes down in the annals of Biblical history as having denied Jesus three times in quick succession.

Peter, along with James and John, comprise the inner core of Jesus' disciples. These three fishermen become Jesus' closest friends and colleagues.

Mark's gospel opens with Jesus encountering them by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus bids them to follow him (1:20). They immediately drop what they are doing to follow Jesus.

These disciples of Jesus are both simultaneously drawn to Jesus and bewildered by him. As they approach Jerusalem, they expect Jesus to claim his rightful throne. Yet, when

*Can you do us
a big favor,
Jesus?*

Jesus begins to talk about his impending suffering and death (10:32-34), they are altogether mystified.

As they travel the road to Jerusalem, James and John make a stunning request: “Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us” (10:35). Essentially, they’re asking for a blank check. Can you do us a big favor, Jesus?

Notice how Jesus responds to their request. He doesn’t say, Sure, anything for you guys. When someone asks a favor, I try not to give my consent until I know the nature of their request. Otherwise, I might find myself in a position of needing to back out of a promise I can’t possibly fulfill.

Jesus asks, “What is it you want me to do for you?” (10:36). Okay, if you really want to, “Grant us to sit one on your right hand, and one at your left in glory” (8:37). When all this talk of suffering and death is over and done with, we’d like the choice seats at your Messianic banquet. They know the seat of honor belongs to Jesus. So they posture to sit on Jesus’ left and right at the head table.

Their appeal to sit to Jesus’ left and right turns out to be a dangerous request. Mark tells us later that two men are positioned to Jesus’ left and right—on crosses (15:27). Crucifixion is undoubtedly the furthest thing from James and John’s minds.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Jesus says (10:38). “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” Yep, they naively answer. I don’t put much stock in their answer. Considering what a self-serving question they pose to Jesus earlier, I doubt they have any idea what Jesus means to drink the cup and yield to baptism.

The other ten disciples become indignant when they learn that the Zebedee brothers have put in first dibs for the best seats in paradise. Jesus reminds them, in verse 42, how the Romans lord it over their subjects. Tyranny is a perennial problem among world rulers. Some of the most powerful rulers are the world’s worst tyrants. They use their power to lord it over their subjects. But such lording it over others is not the Jesus way. Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all” (10:44). In English grammar, this verse is an example of synonymous parallelism in which the first part of the sentence is repeated and reinforced in the second part:

Whoever wishes to be **great**... must be your **servant**.

Whoever wishes to be **first**... must be a **slave** of all.

*Are you here
to serve or be
served?*

True greatness is measured in terms of service, not lordship. Being first is not calculated by how many servants at your disposal, but measured by how many people you serve. Jesus closes with the words, “For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” (10:45).

Don’t miss the profundity of verse 45: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” Our lesson begins with the Zebedee brothers asking to be served and closes with Jesus who serves.

Most world religions are built around a leader who demands total allegiance and complete submission. Christianity is centered on a leader who lays down his life for the sake of his followers. He bestows benefits on his followers by teaching them. He performs selfless acts of service, such as washing their feet. He goes so far as to give his life as a ransom for sin.

We not only serve Jesus. He serves us! So, we seek to emulate him and follow his example. A servant Lord calls for a servant church.

Some Christians claim to be Jesus’ followers. They profess to walk with him and talk with him. They even hang out with his followers. But when it comes to taking to heart Jesus’ call to servanthood, they find better things to do. Where did we get this sense of entitlement

in the church? We presume our attempt to follow Jesus entitles us to receive God’s blessings.

Dr. Jerram Burrs, professor at Covenant Theological Seminary, tells his seminary students that if he happens to visit the church in which one of them serves, he will not first ask, Is this pastor a good preacher? Rather, he will ask the custodial and office staff what its like to work for this pastor. Is this pastor a tyrant or a servant? Is he demanding and harsh or patient and kind? He doesn’t want to hear that his students preach great sermons, but are a pain to work for. A servant Lord calls for a servant church.

Are you here to serve or be served? You can tell whether you are becoming a servant by how you act when people treat you like one.

Toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein removed the portraits of two scientists—Newton and Maxwell—from his wall and replaced them with portraits of Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer. When he was asked about it, he explained it was time to replace the image of success with the image of service.

The story is told of a young man who went on a retreat led by Gandhi. When he learned that he was expected to assist in the daily cleaning of the latrines, he vigorously protested. “Don’t you know I have a doctorate from the London

“I know you can do great things. What I don’t know is whether you can do little things.”

- Gandhi

School of Economics? I’m meant to do great things.” Gandhi replied, “I know you can do great things. What I don’t know is whether you can do little things.”

Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American woman elected to Congress, used to say, “Service is the rent that you pay for room on this earth.” Well said! Think of service as the rent we pay for living.

Our D.C. culture is intoxicated with upward mobility. Everyone is busy climbing these proverbial ladders of success. Power has achieved idolatrous proportions in our city. Everyone is straining for upward mobility.

Those who seek downward mobility have a distinct advantage. We’ll have little competition in giving our lives away in service for others.

Jesus is simultaneously Lord and Servant of the church. Jesus’ lordship is most clearly revealed through his service. I know, it’s counterintuitive, but servanthood has its own kind of power.

When Addison Leitch was Dean of a small college in Pennsylvania, he learned that the walls of a men’s dorm were smeared with shaving cream and the remnants of a food fight. He went to the dorm to investigate. Naturally, no one had any idea how it could have

possibly happened. In room after room, he was received with surprised innocence. That left the Dean with three options. He could ask the custodial staff to do it. He could make every student in the dorm do it. Or he could do it himself. So that’s what he did. He took a wash bucket and towel and set to work. One by one, doors opened, heads popped out, and word spread what the dean of the college was doing, and soon he was not alone in the cleanup job. Addison’s wife, Elisabeth Elliot, writes her recollections of this experience and adds the comment, “The power of servanthood. It commands respect. It does not demand it.”

A servant Lord calls for a servant church. More people will be drawn to Christ not by the church lording it over others, but by our service.

Humility is not thinking too much or too little of us. Humility knows our place; our place before God. We are not God; we are servants of the living God.

A servant Lord calls for a servant church.