

## Greatness Explained

Mark 10:35-45

Bryn MacPhail / March 25, 2012

I have not yet lived in The Bahamas for two years, but even in this short time one can't help but to observe a few things.

We live in a culture that, by every appearance, cares immensely about *titles* and about *status*.

We care immensely about the preservation of *protocol* as it relates to recognizing certain individuals within public contexts.

Perhaps, I'm simply observing a culture that is more formal than the one from which I came.

I worry, however, that in some instances there is too much emphasis placed upon a person's credentials and status within society.

If I am to cite specific examples, I will confine myself to speaking about my own occupation.

I understand that there are legitimate ways for a minister of the Gospel to be ordained as a “bishop”, but it seems to me that in The Bahamas, we have a disproportionate number of *bishops*.

Whether these bishops are self-proclaimed, or whether they have been unduly propped up by their congregations, I do not know.

I simply note that there are a lot of bishops in this country.

I also note that there are even a few “apostles” in Nassau.

In the New Testament, one of the qualifications for being an apostle was you had to have personally witnessed the Resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22; 1Cor. 9:1).

I don't want to sound unkind, and so I will stop there with my specific examples.

As we look at the text before us this morning, we see that even some who lived in close proximity to Jesus had an unhealthy desire for status and notoriety.

Our passage begins with an unthinkable request from two of Jesus' closest companions, James and John.

Mark says that the sons of Zebedee approach Jesus and say, **"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask"** (10:35).

Evidently Jesus is not bothered by their bold approach since He responds by asking, **"What do you want Me to do for you?"** (10:36).

Here's the unthinkable part. The brothers answer, **"Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory"** (10:37).

The phrase, **"in your glory"** anticipates a time when Jesus is seated on His throne during His kingdom reign.

James and John are looking for top cabinet positions in this soon-to-be-formed government.

They're looking for status.

They're looking for power.

There is some irony in their request.

What would you say was Jesus' moment of greatest glory?

At what moment does Jesus most show forth the glory of God's justice?

And where does Jesus reveal most profoundly the glory of God's love? (Tim Keller)

It's on the cross.

When Jesus triumphs over sin and death, when Jesus declares the mission "**finished**", He is on the cross...and there is someone on His right and on His left, but they are the criminals who are being crucified.

Accordingly, Jesus says to James and John, "**You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?**" (10:38).

You might remember Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His arrest, when Jesus prayed to the Father, "**Take this cup from Me**" (14:36).

The “**cup**” and the “**baptism**” are references to the fury of God that Jesus will absorb on our behalf on the cross.

The most difficult aspect of Jesus’ mission was not dying. The most difficult aspect for Jesus—the one thing that gave Him pause in the garden, was the prospect of the Father’s judgment.

James and John did not understand all of the implications of their request and yet they insist to Jesus that they are able.

They were deeply committed to Jesus, but they didn’t realize that before long they would abandon Jesus at the first sign of serious trouble.

But rather than chide them, Jesus tells them they too will share in the cup and baptism of His suffering.

It won’t be the cup of God’s wrath, but it will be suffering that comes from their allegiance to Jesus.

We don’t know for certain how John dies after being exiled to Patmos, but we do know that James dies by the sword because his execution is recorded by Luke in Acts 12:2.

While Jesus doesn't chide James and John for their request, a bit of controversy does emerge.

Mark tells us that when the other 10 disciples heard about the request made by their colleagues **"they became displeased"** (10:41).

That sounds like an understatement, doesn't it?

Jesus uses the emerging controversy over status and position to teach His followers about its rightful place in their lives.

In Jesus day, secular rulers were quick to assert their authority over others.

Those who were "in charge", reminded you who was "in charge".

Those who had status made sure you knew about it, and made sure you addressed them accordingly.

That's 1<sup>st</sup> Century culture. That could also be a description of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture. Or quite possibly, this is an apt description of human nature?

Either way, Jesus says to His followers: **“Not so with you”** (10:43).

Followers of Jesus are supposed to be different. Followers of Jesus are supposed to be counter-cultural in this respect.

Whatever *status* has been assigned to us; whatever *authority* has been given to us; whatever *resources* are at our disposal, we are to use these for the benefit of others.

-> Greatness, according to Jesus, is not based on what we possess, but rather, it is based on what we give up. <-

Jesus says, **“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all”** (10:44).

There you have it—greatness turned on its head.

That's not the way it works in our society, but that's the way it is designed to work in God's society.

In the parallel passage of this account in Luke, Jesus makes an analogy to the dinner table.

Jesus asks, **"Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table?"** (Lk. 22:27).

But then listen to what Jesus says... **"I am among you as one who serves"** (Lk. 22:27).

The Son of God.

The second Member of the Trinity.

The Almighty One.

The King of Kings...

Says to His followers, **"I am among you as one who serves"**!

Mark's version expands this. As Jesus makes His case for greatness through service, He points to His own mission, saying, **"the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many"** (10:45).



This instruction has massive implications for those who wish to identify with Christ.

Somehow, in spite of Jesus instruction, it has become a common phrase in the Christian vocabulary to say, “I am serving the Lord”.

I’ve probably used the phrase myself sometimes—without even thinking, without even remembering that Jesus said, “**I came not to be served**”!

To follow Jesus does not mean we serve Jesus.

To follow Jesus means we serve those who Jesus would serve.

I find Jesus’ analogy of the dinner table to be very compelling. I love to go out for dinner. I don’t do it a lot, but I enjoy it immensely.

It’s nice to have someone else pour your drinks.

It’s nice to have someone bring you that basket of warm bread.

It’s nice to have someone else prepare your meal and bring it to you.

It's nice to have someone clean up after you when you're done.  
It's nice to have someone serve you... Isn't it?

And then along comes Jesus and He says, **"I am among you as one who serves."**

And, as a follower of Jesus, that means you are within this community as one who serves.

I'm not saying that it is wrong to have someone cook your meals, clean your house, or cut your grass.

But I do want to ask this morning: Who are you serving?

Think beyond your immediate family. Think beyond your best friends. Think beyond what your employer requires you to do (and pays you to do).

Who are you serving?

If the list happens to be modest, let's reframe the question.  
Who would Jesus be serving if He were here?

Who would Jesus be serving if He were here?

If you can answer that, then you have identified your mission.

The next question we might want to ask is: *How shall our serving be marked?*

Again, we look to Jesus and we have our answer.

Yes, Jesus healed people. Yes, Jesus fed people. Yes, Jesus washed His disciples' feet. But when He taught them about *greatness*—when Jesus taught His followers about what it means to serve, He talked about His death.

**The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.**

I'm not suggesting that we all need to go find something or someone to die for. But I am suggesting that our service to others ought to cost us something.

If Jesus points to His death as His example of what it means to serve, surely that means for you and for me that our service should include the element of *sacrifice*.

We've talked a lot lately about the Kirk's desire to be a conduit for community transformation.

I think we understand that the local church is the means by which the Spirit of Christ chooses to function in a physical environment.

As such, our aim is to function as Christ would function.

Our aim is to make less of ourselves and to make more of others.

We need to convey to our community that we are among them in the name of the One who serves.

We need to convey to our community that, like Christ, we are not takers, but givers.

In this regard we have come a long way in a relatively short period of time.

There may have been a historical perception out there that St. Andrew's Kirk was a church for the "elite" of society.

Unfortunately, perceptions have a habit of lingering beyond the boundaries of reality.

Can we commit to creating a new perception for the Kirk?

Will you help me get the message out—through our words and through our deeds—will you help me get the message out?

We stand among Bahamians as a congregation ready to serve them sacrificially. Amen.

