

“The Way Up is Down”
The Gospel According to Mark 10:32-45
August 5th, 2018

This past Wednesday evening, Jan and I listened to daughter Molly’s first podcast on the Internet at feistyfortruth.com. Molly and her friend Danielle are providing the podcast as a resource to encourage others in the Christian faith, especially young ladies.

In the podcast, Molly mentions she is “passionate for leadership.” That’s for sure; she is comfortable being in charge! She’s climbing the ladder at her place of employment in Bloomington, presently serving on the leadership team as the manager of retail. Among the books on the night table next to Molly’s bed are *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times* by Don Phillips and *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t* by Jim Collins, both standard texts for those interested in leadership.

I, too, have had a passion for leadership most of my life. One of the great collegiate coaches of all time is John Wooden, whose UCLA Bruins basketball team won 10 national championships in a 12 year period, including 7 in a row from 1967-1973. Here’s one of his many great quotes, “Be more concerned with your character than with your reputation because your character is what you really are while your reputation is merely what others think you are.”

For the past several Sundays, we’ve been working our way through the 10th chapter of the Gospel According to Mark. Last Sunday, Jesus taught on the dangers of earthly riches; there are/will be few people in heaven who were wealthy this side of eternity because they didn’t have a need for Christ; they had/have all money can buy! Jesus said we must be fully dependent upon Him or we have no chance of entering the kingdom of God. The riches we must be concerned about this side of eternity are the inheritance we will receive in glory that God has prepared for us from before time began.

In today’s text, Jesus teaches His followers what it means to be leaders in the kingdom of God. We are to be servants, not armchair executives. As such, we see “the way up is down.”

Whether you realize it or not, most of you are leaders. Obviously, if you are an ordained elder or deacon in Christ’s Church or an officer in the Women in the Church (WIC), you have leadership responsibility. If you are an elected or appointed public servant, you are a leader. If you are parents, you are the leaders of your families. If you are a business owner, you are a leader; if you fill a supervisory position in your employment, you are a leader. Teachers are leaders of their students. Baby-sitters are in a leadership capacity. Some of you will one day be leaders even if you are not presently. This passage of Scripture, therefore, is for every one of us!

The Gospel According to Mark 10:32-45:

³²Now they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them; and they were amazed. And as they followed they were afraid. Then He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: ³³“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; ³⁴and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.”

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.”

³⁶ And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

³⁷ They said to Him, “Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.”

³⁸ But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

³⁹ They said to Him, “We are able.”

So Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it is prepared.”

⁴¹ And when the ten heard *it*, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John. ⁴² But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. ⁴⁴ And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

The first three verses of today’s passage (32-34) make up the third occasion whereby Jesus prophesied to His disciples what His mission entailed as the Messiah of God. The first was in **Mark 8:31** and the second was in **Mark 9:31**. Jesus would be arrested, tried, sentenced, and killed. Further, He would rise again from the grave. Such a teaching was really difficult for the disciples to comprehend. Verse 32 says they were both “amazed” (some versions say ‘astonished’) and “afraid.” And for the first time, Jesus reveals that this would take place in Jerusalem (v. 33).

As we think about the marvelous truths of these three verses and their application to us, consider the words of Bishop JC Ryle who notes, “Surely, if Jesus (willingly) died for us, it is a small thing to require Christians to live for Him.” (Ryle, 215) *Friend, what sacrifices could you point to in your life as proof that you are God’s child by faith in Christ? Are you sacrificially giving of your income to the work of the Church? How are you dying to self? Do you submit to the elders’ leadership as they endeavor to submit to Christ? Husbands, are you loving your wives in thought, word, and deed? Wives, do you respect and cherish the man gave God you to live with? Children, are you honoring your parents by obeying them as they seek to lead you as Christian parents?*

Despite their astonishment, there was beginning to be a twinkling of comprehension in the minds of some of the disciples. Back in Chapter 9, three of the disciples – Peter, James & John – went with Jesus up the mountain and witnessed His transfiguration. That was when the heavens opened, just a slice, and Jesus ratified the work of His only begotten, eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Perhaps what they witnessed there helped them to better understand. Regardless, with verse 35 in today’s sermon text, we see James and John telling Jesus they’d like for Him to do what they want; and they want Him to agree to do that without knowing what they had in mind.

James and John were beginning to think about what was soon to take place. They reflected upon the Old Testament Scriptures and how Jesus fulfilled them. *Their request of Him?* To sit at Jesus’ right and left hand in His glory. In ancient culture, the seat at someone’s right was reserved as the position of honor. The left-hand seat was for an intimate friend. “In the least, this is a grotesquely inappropriate request. At most, it is a power play.” (Card, 132) “It was like asking

their Master to hand over a blank check, for them to fill in.” (Hendriksen, 410) Sinclair Ferguson’s thought here is helpful, “(James and John) were looking for a crown without a cross, glory without suffering, honor without humility.” (Ferguson, 173)

In verse 36, Jesus refuses to commit Himself. Making blind promises is never smart. He asks them what they have in mind. (Similarly, I thank you when you give me an idea of what you want to talk about when we make an appointment to meet with each other; it helps me prepare better!)

With verse 38, Jesus explains they don’t know the implications of what they ask of Him. In the Old Testament, the cup symbolized the wrath of God’s judgment. You’ll remember Jesus’ prayer request in the Garden of Gethsemane of God the Father, “Father, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I will, but what you will.” That cup was the cup of judgment. To atone for the sins of the people He came to earth to save, Jesus had to be punished for their salvation from sin.

Further, when Jesus mentions in today’s passage of Scripture being “baptized”, He makes reference to being overwhelmed with the waters of God’s judgment. Many times in the New Testament, the Greek forms for the term “baptize” do not mean ‘to dip,’ but instead ‘to be identified with.’ This is one of those instances.

True to form, James and John were careless with their words. They said they knew what they were asking, and they were willing to drink the cup of judgment and be baptized. With verse 39, Jesus agreed that they would know the persecution of the world, but it wasn’t up to Him to assign seats for eternity. That was determined long ago before the world was created.

When the other 10 disciples heard what James and John tried to get Jesus to do, they were indignant. They may have thought how pig-headed and selfish that was, or they may have felt that James and John had beaten them to the punch. *Isn’t it easy to condemn in others what we excuse in ourselves?*

In verses 42-44, Jesus gives a simple principal. “The way of the disciple is different from the way of the world. In the kingdom of God, true greatness is measured by our service, not by the number of our servants. It is seen, not in how high up the ladder we have climbed, but how far down the ladder we are prepared to climb for the sake of others. True discipleship has at its heart letting go of our desire for honor in this world, in order to bestow honor on others.” (Ferguson, 174)

Mark 10:45 is among the most precious of Christ’s sayings. From all eternity, Jesus Christ is the all-glorious One; even so, “He humbles Himself. He becomes incarnate, and this not with the purpose of being served but of serving.” (Hendriksen, 415) The Apostle Paul speaks about Jesus’ obedience to the plan of God in a very familiar passage of Scripture. Writing to the Church in Philippi, we read these words (**Philippians 2:5-8**):

“⁵ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross.”

We note also in this verse that Jesus says He came to be a sacrifice for many, not all. (**Matthew 1:21**, for instance).

I have given the title “The Way Up is Down” to this message. God’s kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom rocks our world and turns it upside down. Consider these biblical truths:

- * We see unseen things.
- * We conquer by yielding.
- * We reign by serving.
- * We are made great by becoming small.
- * We are exalted when we are humble.
- * We become wise by being fools for Christ’s sake.
- * We are made free by becoming bondservants.
- * We gain strength when we are weak.
- * We triumph through defeat.
- * We find victory by glorying in our infirmities.
- * We live by dying.

It would seem that many professing believers in Jesus Christ are content with being spectators in the arena of spiritual warfare. Few are willing to do what is needed to be done. That could be lovingly confronting someone else in their sin; it could be making the commitment to attend – or teach - a Bible study or prayer gathering during the week. (*Doesn’t it appear that those with the most time on their hands are the least likely to invest themselves in the work of discipleship?*) Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do, friends.

One of my favorite leaders in the corporate world is Lee Iacocca – former Chief Executive Officer of Ford Motors who was hired by the nearly bankrupt Chrysler Corporation. Within a few years, Chrysler was showing record profits. This is a quote of Iacocca’s, “Apply yourself. Get all the education you can, but then, by God, *do* something. Don’t just stand there, make it happen!”

A man had just arrived at the gates of heaven, and told the first man he saw how grateful he was to be in such a glorious place. He asked that he be given one glimpse into hell in order that he might appreciate his reward even more. That wish was granted.

In hell, the man saw a long table extending as far as the eye could reach. The table was filled with the most delicious of all foods. But the man noticed that everyone around the table was starving. When asked for an explanation, the host replied, “Everyone is required to take food from the table only with 4-foot long chopsticks. They are so long that no one can reach the food from the table to his mouth, and therefore, each one is starving.”

Quickly, they returned to heaven, and behold, the new arrival saw an identical table, filled with identical foods but everyone around the table was happy and well fed. The man asked, “With what do they take food from the table?”

The host answered, “Only with 4 foot long chopsticks.” The new arrival was confused, “Then why are all those in hell starving while all those up here are so well fed and happy?”

The host replied, “In heaven, we feed each other.”