

“The Upside Down Kingdom” (Mark 10:35–45)

Do you remember your first day of high school, college, or graduate school? What types of emotions did you experience? I’ll never forget my first day of graduate school. I was excited and apprehensive. I was looking forward to the challenge of seminary and preparing for pastoral ministry, yet I wondered if I could cut the mustard academically. I had only been married a month and was eager to begin a new life with Lori. I was excited about my classes, especially my class on the book of Romans. I couldn’t believe I was going to be able to spend an entire semester studying Romans—the greatest book of the Bible. The professor for this class was, Dr. John Terveen. I’ll always remember my first day of his class. The attendance roster was being read and my name was called. Dr. Terveen smiled and said, “Hey, Krell, what’s it like having a wife who can out preach you?” Of course, the class erupted in laughter.

This amusing but accurate remark stemmed from the May 1993 baccalaureate sermon at Multnomah University. My wife to be, Lori Griffin, was the valedictorian speaker and she preached the best sermon I’ve ever heard on Mark 10:35–45. One Multnomah staff member said that he might have to rethink his view of women in ministry. A Bible professor said it was the best sermon he’s heard a woman preach in the last thirty years. Regardless of how well I preach this text, this sermon will be the second best sermon preached by a member of the Krell family.

It is important for you to know that even though I have taken eight preaching classes, Lori has taught me more about preaching than any other professor or biblical scholar. Having listened to thousands of sermons during her life, Lori is a student of preaching. Hence, she knows my preaching strengths and weaknesses and is able to evaluate both. Furthermore, her journalism background has given her great command of the English language. Consequently, she has edited and critiqued my sermons for years. Lori’s mission in life has been to serve me and ensure that our ministry is faithful to God. I share all this with you so that you understand that if there is anything worthwhile in my preaching, it is because of my wife’s expertise and patience. More importantly, if there is any good that comes out of our ministry it is because of God’s grace and Lori’s humility and self-sacrifice to serve our family and me.

In Mark 10:35–45,¹ Jesus and His disciples have one of the most memorable dialogues in the New Testament. In these eleven verses, Jesus emphasizes the importance of humility and service. He insists that self-giving service is the only greatness recognized by God, and only those who give of themselves for others will be the big winners with God.² In so many words, Jesus insists that we must: *Climb down the ladder to greatness*. In other words, instead of ambitiously seeking to climb the ladder and attain greatness, we must sacrificially serve others. Jesus reveals that He is the King of an upside down kingdom. His rules go against the grain of what our world says.

In 10:35, while Jesus is speaking of His looming death (cf. 10:32–34), James and John³ approach Him. James and John are two brothers who belong to Jesus’ “inner circle.”⁴ The inner circle also includes Peter. These disciples are especially intimate with Christ. They alone were present for the healing of Jairus’ daughter (5:37) and for the Transfiguration when Jesus was glorified (9:2). James and John are also called “the sons of thunder” (3:17). These brothers have fiery personalities and zeal for the Lord. This leads them to ask a rather presumptuous question: **“Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.”** In other words, “Jesus, we have this blank check . . . would you mind just signing your name right here so we can cash it in?” Several times my daughter, Jena, has asked me, “Daddy, will you promise to do whatever I ask?” In other words, Jena wants some degree of confidence that I will say “yes” to whatever she asks me. Needless to say, I find it rather unwise to make blind promises. Earlier in Mark’s gospel, Herod Antipas made a blank check promise of up to “half of his kingdom” that resulted in his wife and daughter requesting John the Baptist’s head be delivered to her on a platter (cf. 6:22–23).⁵ Wisdom dictates not making blind promises.

Since Jesus is wise and shrewd, He asks James and John, **“What do you want Me to do for you?”** (10:36). Jesus cuts to the chase and makes the brothers cough up exactly what they want Him to do for them. The brothers reply, **“Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory”** (10:37). The word “grant” (*dos*) is an imperative verb of command, not a request. In other words, these brothers are audaciously commanding Jesus for a seat of authority.⁶

Every night when I was growing up, my parents would take turns reading the Bible to my brother and me. Our time of Bible study took place in my younger brother’s room. My Dad or Mom would sit on the middle of the bed and Tim and I would sit on the left or right side. Every night, we would fight for the left side. We both wanted the left side because it was the closest to the door. If we behaved well, when we were done with our Bible study, we could go upstairs and play. So every night we would position ourselves so that we could sit on the left side and be the first to exit the room. There were times when I would deliberately go downstairs early, hide behind my brother’s door, and wait for him to adjourn downstairs. The moment he entered his room, I would dive on the bed in front of him. Other times, I would let him sit down and then I would pounce on top of him, wrestle him off the bed, and assume his position on the left. This became quite a problem. One night, my Dad said, “Boys, did you know that the right hand is the highest assigned position?” We said, “Huh?” He then explained the story of James and John and their request. This began a fierce war for the right side of the bed! Okay, back to our story.

James and John believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and they thought He was likely going to establish His kingdom when they reached Jerusalem. These brothers wanted the positions of highest honor. To be seated at the king’s right hand was to take the position of most prominence; the person seated at the left hand ranked just below that (Luke 22:24–30). James and John wanted the number one and number two spots. They wanted to be Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. I find it interesting that James and John thought that not everyone received the same eternal reward; otherwise they would not have requested the highest thrones in God’s kingdom. Jesus had been teaching that another world existed beyond their present life and that some positions in God’s kingdom were better than others. In fact, Jesus guaranteed the disciples twelve thrones in His coming kingdom as part of their reward for following Him (Matt 19:28). Yet, James and John said, “It’s nice to make the top twelve, Jesus, but we have higher aspirations than those other ten guys. We would like to reserve a couple of the executive suites. Nonsmoking please.” How insensitive can you get?! It’s insensitive to Jesus, but it’s also cruel to other disciples. To James and John, life is like the reality show *Survivor*, and they’ve just voted the other ten disciples off the island.⁷

In 10:38a, Jesus says to these ambitious, seemingly cutthroat brothers, **“You do not know what you are asking.”** God usually answers prayer in one of four ways: Yes, no, wait, or “you do not know what you are asking.” The answer to their request is behind door number four. Most of us pray this way, don’t we? We like to tell Jesus what to do. Our slogan is: “Ask not what you can do for your God; ask what your God can do for you.”⁸ However, it is critical to note that Jesus doesn’t rebuke James and John for being ambitious, nor does He reject them for having drive and desire. He is pleased that they desire kingdom greatness. However, Jesus wants to explain that biblical ambition needs to be transformed into a humility directed toward serving others rather than a proud serving of self. He wants these brothers to understand the need to *climb down the ladder to greatness*. So Jesus warns them of what will be involved in their quest for kingdom greatness. In 10:38b, He explains that greatness always involves suffering. Jesus asks, **“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”** Both the analogy of the cup⁹ and the word baptism¹⁰ were used figuratively in the ancient world for suffering. Jesus is asking these two brothers if they can suffer the same type of suffering that He is preparing to enter into. In other words, Jesus asks James and John if they can handle the cross. Jesus was crucified with a thief on His right and a thief on His left. Yet, James and John didn’t ask to be on those two crosses, but to wear the crowns on His right and left. They wanted recognition, not crucifixion. Yet, the disciples need to concentrate on present service rather than future honor.

James and John confidently affirm, **“We are able”** (10:39a). This response consists of one word in the Greek: *dunametha* = “We are able; we are powerful!” These brothers assume they can endure all the suffering that Jesus might have to endure because they have not understood the full ramifications of what He has predicted. They are thinking of military and political greatness. As a result, these two brothers are self-confident like Muhammad Ali. Ali was on a plane preparing for take off when a flight attendant asked him to buckle his seat belt. Ali said to her, “Superman don’t need no seat-belt.” The flight attendant quickly answered, “Superman don’t need no airplane either.” If we’re honest, we too can exude this kind of overconfidence. Yet, we must keep in mind Paul’s warnings, “Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought” (Rom 12:3) and “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall” (1 Cor 10:12). We must recognize our deep-seated need to depend upon Christ.

Jesus responds to the brothers’ boast by saying, **“The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared”**¹¹ (10:39–40). Jesus predicts the suffering of these two brothers. Interestingly, James was the first apostle to die a martyr’s death (Acts 12) and John was the last disciple to die in exile on the island of Patmos. So these two brothers will suffer making themselves eligible for kingdom authority; however, Jesus informs that God the Father makes the final decision who will be seated where. Jesus is saying, “Men, keep serving Me, prepared to suffer for Me, and My Father will determine your status in the kingdom. But don’t allow impure motivations to tarnish your quest for greatness. We too must be prepared to suffer. We must not want the benefits without the bruises, the glory without the gore, the position without the persecution, or the blessings without the bumps. Instead, we must *climb down the ladder to greatness*.

After hearing the brothers’ request, the other ten disciples **“began to feel indignant with James and John”** (10:41). No doubt, they had also been saying, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the greatest of us all?” The disciples wanted those positions for themselves and became “indignant” because they didn’t come up with the request themselves. Interestingly, this same verb is used of Jesus’ reaction to the disciples when they dismissed the mothers and children of Jerusalem (10:14). A man’s character is shown by the things that provoke his strongest reactions.¹² Do you become indignant over those things that grieve and hurt the heart of God?

Before all of this indignation escalates into a full-on brawl, Jesus gathers His disciples and says, **“You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all”** (10:42–44). In these three verses, Jesus expounds on His upside down kingdom. Three observations are in order. (1) Jesus uses the word “you” three times. His goal is to contrast the world’s leadership principles with God’s leadership principles. Jesus describes how the world operates (10:42) and then contrast God’s kingdom with the world’s system (10:43–44). The world demands respect through pride, power, and pressure. The follower of Jesus is unassuming and seeks to exercise humility, grace, and service. In the world’s economy, the higher up you get, the more you are served. But in God’s economy, the higher up you get, the more you serve others. “The lowliest will be the loftiest. Those who give up most will get most.”¹³ (2) Jesus uses a subjunctive mood for “wish” (*thele*) which indicates that some will and some will not wish to be great or first. The term is also in the present tense indicating an ongoing desire or ambition. God’s goal is for you and me to wish to be great in His kingdom. (3) Jesus makes a distinction between “servant” and “slave.” The word “servant” (*diakonos*) originally meant to heap dust because a good servant moved so fast that dust flew around him. Then it was used for the boys who carried the towels in the bath houses. In the religious sense, it took on the idea of one who ministered or rendered a service to another. The “slave” (*doulos*), however, was one who did not have the right to refuse. The slave’s entire life was at the disposal of the master.¹⁴ This is Christ’s expectation of His disciples. May we *climb down the ladder to greatness*.

Our passage concludes with some of the most shocking words in the New Testament. Jesus says, “**For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.**”¹⁵ Even the Son of Man had to follow the rule that Jesus just explained. He’s the great example of it. The way up is to go down. This verse is not only the climax of this paragraph (10:35–44), but it is the key verse of Mark’s Gospel. This verse is also the dividing point of the book of Mark. The first section of the book emphasized servanthood, whereas the second section will emphasize His coming death. In 10:45, Mark explains the purpose of Jesus’ death—He gave His life as a “ransom.” Mark uses the word “ransom” (*lutron*) which means, “The price paid to free a slave or captive.”¹⁶ Mark also points out that Christ gave His life a ransom “for” (*anti*) others. This word means, “in place of others.” Jesus died as a substitute.¹⁷ If Jesus, the God-man was willing to serve, how much more so should we. The following principles show how we can model Jesus’ brand of servanthood.

- **Seek to “out-serve” others.** Today needs to mark your commitment to have a “service contest” and out-serve your spouse, children, neighbors, coworkers, and church members. Of course, the best place to begin is in the home. Seek to make dinner, take care of the kids, do the dishes, sweep the kitchen floor, or clean the bathrooms. If some husbands and wives would start having a contest like this we would see some wounded marriages start to heal. The reason is that in most troubled marriages, the problem is either one or two selfish people who want their own way.¹⁸ But when one person seeks to out-serve the other, God can move in a powerful way. Pray today that you will adopt an attitude of servanthood. And, remember, you can tell whether you are becoming a servant by how you act when people treat you like one. *Climb down the ladder to greatness.*
- **Serve in some small way.** If you’re like me, you want the most “bang for your buck.” You may want to make a splash in ministry. However, what impresses earth doesn’t typically impress heaven. Try serving God in little things. It’s wonderful to accomplish great things for Christ, but sometimes our greatest works are in the little things. Encourage a servant who is serving behind the scenes in your church (e.g., nursery, pastoral visitation, prayer ministry, facilities/grounds). Ask a servant/leader what you can do to serve her or him. Take the initiative to pick up garbage in the parking lot, take items to the lost and found, reorganize the pew Bibles, etc. Serving behind the scenes in small ways facilitates humility and ensures purity of heart. These acts are most likely to lead to great eternal rewards.
- **Serve in the church.** The local church is the bride of Christ and she needs *you*. Thus, it is critical that you serve in at least one area of ministry. Ideally, it should be in an area of ministry in keeping with your spiritual gift(s) and passion. Regardless though find a ministry niche and serve as if your church is depending upon you . . . because she is! Make a difference. If you are a leader, stop and recognize that a good leader is a good servant. Only the one who serves is qualified to lead. When you serve, you are walking in the sandals of Jesus, who served and gave His life as a ransom for many.

It’s been said that your local church is like a bank: the more you put into it, the greater your interest. In my pastoral ministry, I have received a lot of complaints from believers who are cynical and critical about the local church. Yet, generally, these individuals are not putting anything into the church—they aren’t serving the body. As a result, they tend to focus on the warts and foibles of the church. However, those believers who are serving in the trenches of their local church don’t have time to whine and gripe because they’re too busy serving. These warriors serve week in and week out. As they serve, their interest in the local church increases. They grow to love the people and the ministries in their church. They become a part of the solution instead of a part of the problem. I challenge you today to put more into your church so that your interest increases. *Climb down the ladder to greatness.*

Scripture References

Mark 10:35–45

Matthew 19:23–30; 20:20–28

Luke 22:24–30

Galatians 5:13–14

Colossians 3:23–24

1 Peter 4:10–11

Revelation 22:1–5

Study Questions

1. What are my spiritual aspirations for 2010 (10:35–37)? Have I shared with Jesus what I'd like Him to accomplish in my life and ministry? Am I asking Him to do great things in and through me? Why or why not? Who have I shared my goals and desires with? If I haven't done so, will I find a brother or sister to share with?
2. Am I prepared to take on Christ's suffering (10:38–41)? How have I suffered for Christ in the past? What was my attitude in the midst of my suffering? In what ways am I presently suffering? How can I see my suffering as an opportunity to honor God?
3. How does servanthood result in greatness (10:42–44)? When have I seen a servant exalted at work, school, or church? How did this inspire and challenge me? How does temporal exaltation illustrate the eternal exaltation that will occur at the judgment seat of Christ?
4. How does Jesus' model of servanthood inspire me (10:45)? What impresses me most about Jesus' willingness to serve others? What are key "take away" principles and applications from Jesus' example of servanthood that I can utilize in my personal life and ministry?
5. Who are some outstanding servants that need my encouragement? How can I affirm these individuals? Today, will I write an email or hand-written card of appreciation to a servant? On a weekly basis, will I look for servants at my church that I can verbally encourage?

Notes

¹ Cf. Matt 20:20–28. This section parallels Mark 9:30–37. Both sections deal with true greatness, and both follow predictions of Jesus' passion. This second incident shows the disciples' lack of spiritual perception and their selfishness even more than the first one.

² David Garland, *Mark*. NIV Application Commentary, New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 416.

³ The Matt 20:20 parallel says that the inquiry came from their mother. At the very least, we know that this request was in both parties' hearts.

⁴ See Mark 1:19, 29; 3:17; 5:37; 9:2.

⁵ Louis Barbieri, *Mark*. Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 234.

⁶ Matt 20:20 says it was the mother of James and John who sought Jesus. We can't know for certain whether this was her idea or the sons put her up to it.

⁷ Matt Woodley, "Purpose: Living as a Servant" (Mark 10:232–45): www.preachingtoday.com.

⁸ Many of these humorous insights remarks have been taken from Kent Crockett, *Making Today Count for Eternity* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 137–38.

⁹ E.g., Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15–28; 49:12; 51:7; Ezek 23:31–34; Hab 2:16; Zech 12:2.

¹⁰ E.g., Job 22:11; Ps 18:16; 42:7; 69:1–2, 15; Isa 43:2.

¹¹ The verb *hetoimastai* ("prepared") is a perfect passive and indicates that from eternity past, as part of the divine decrees the Father has set the appointed order of heaven.

¹² R. Alan Cole, *The Gospel According to Mark*. Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1989), 170.

¹³ W. Graham Scroggie, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 189.

¹⁴ David Garland, "Mark" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 265.

¹⁵ "Many" (lit. "the many") contrasts with the one life (*psuchen*) of Jesus given as a payment (cf. Mark 14:24). One man's act affected many others. "Many" does not mean some in contrast to all. While Jesus' death benefits everyone in one sense and the elect in another sense that was not the point of Jesus' contrast here. Jesus took the place of everyone else by paying the penalty for their sins.

¹⁶ The only two occurrence of *lutron* ("ransom") in the NT is in Matt 20:28. In koine Greek (the common Greek of the NT world), this word often described the money paid to release slaves. In the NT, it has a narrower, more theological meaning, namely release or redemption.

¹⁷ The word *anti* ("for") means "instead of" or "in place of," a clear reference to substitution (cf. Matt 2:22; Luke 11:11; 1 Pet 3:9). *Anti* is only used here in Mark's gospel. Wallace writes, "In summary, the evidence appears to be overwhelmingly in favor of viewing *anti*, in Matt 20:28/Mark 10:45 as meaning *in the place of* and very possibly with the secondary meaning *in exchange for*, while the evidence for it meaning simply the vague idea of *on behalf of* is suspect at best. However, it is important to note that the theory of substitutionary atonement is usually based on passages involving *huper*. As Davies points out: However, although it may be admitted that Mark 10:45 does teach substitution, it is often argued that our understanding of the work of Christ must not rest on a single passage which, according to some, is of doubtful authenticity anyway. It is said that we must take account of the fact that the preposition most frequently used in statements about the death of Christ is *huper* with the genitive, which [allegedly] means 'on behalf of' and cannot mean 'in the place of.' See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 367.

¹⁸ Tony Evans, *Who is This King of Glory?* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 314.