

Not So with You

A Study of Mark 10:32–45

Main Point: Jesus redefined greatness for his disciples: the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many—and those who follow him must adopt the same posture of self-giving service rather than grasping for power and position.

Introduction

In 1964, Muhammad Ali stood over Sonny Liston and shouted, "I am the greatest!" It was brash, arrogant, and—in the world of boxing—arguably true. Ali understood greatness the way the world understands it: dominance, victory, others beneath you. He was not alone. From ancient emperors to modern CEOs, the definition has remained remarkably consistent. Greatness means power. Greatness means people serve you.

Jesus' disciples operated with the same assumptions. They had left everything to follow a man they believed was the Messiah, and they expected the Messiah to establish a kingdom. Kingdoms have thrones. Thrones have seats of honor beside them. James and John wanted those seats. The other ten were furious—not because the request was inappropriate but because they had not thought to ask first. The entire group was competing for position in an administration they assumed would look like every other administration in history.

Jesus had just told them, for the third time, that he was going to Jerusalem to be mocked, spat upon, flogged, and killed. They heard the words but could not process them. Their categories had no room for a suffering Messiah. So while Jesus spoke of death, they dreamed of thrones. While he walked resolutely toward a cross, they argued about who would sit at his right and left.

What followed was one of the most important teachings in the Gospels. Jesus did not merely correct their ambition; he redefined greatness itself. The Son of Man—the glorious figure who would receive an everlasting kingdom—came not to be served but to serve. His throne would be a cross. His glory would be displayed in self-giving death. And those who wanted to share his kingdom would need to follow him on the same path: not grasping for power but giving themselves for others.

Examination

On the road to Jerusalem (10:32–34)

The scene opens with Jesus and his disciples on the road, heading toward Jerusalem. Mark notes something unusual about Jesus' demeanor: he was walking ahead of them, and the disciples were astonished while those following were afraid. Something in his manner alarmed them. Jesus was not strolling; he was marching—resolutely, deliberately, toward a destination they dreaded. The tension in the group was palpable. They sensed that whatever awaited in Jerusalem would be the climax of everything they had witnessed.

This was the third time Jesus had predicted his death, and this prediction was the most detailed. He would be handed over to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They would condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. The Gentiles would mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him. Three days later he would rise. Every element of the passion narrative is compressed into these few sentences: Jewish trial, Roman execution, physical brutality, death, resurrection. Jesus knew exactly what awaited him in Jerusalem, and he walked toward it anyway.

The passive verb "handed over" carried dual significance. On one level it referred to Judas, who would betray Jesus to the authorities. But the same verb appeared throughout Scripture to describe God's sovereign action in delivering people into particular circumstances. Jesus was not merely a victim of human conspiracy; he was fulfilling a divine purpose. His death was engineered by human beings and ordained by God simultaneously.

For the first time, Jesus explicitly named the Gentiles as his executioners. The Jewish leaders would initiate the process, but Rome would carry out the sentence. This detail mattered because it fulfilled the pattern of Scripture and underscored the universal scope of what was happening. Israel's Messiah would be rejected by Israel's leaders and killed by the nations—yet his death would benefit both Jews and Gentiles alike.

The request of James and John (10:35–40)

Immediately after Jesus described his coming humiliation and death, James and John approached him with a request. They wanted Jesus to grant them whatever they asked. The timing was breathtaking in its insensitivity. Jesus had just spoken of being mocked, spat upon, flogged, and killed—and these two disciples were positioning themselves for power.

Their request was specific: they wanted to sit at Jesus' right and left hand in his glory. They had witnessed the transfiguration and concluded that Jesus was destined for a throne. They

were not wrong about that. But they imagined a kingdom that operated by the same rules as every other kingdom—where proximity to the king meant privilege, where being first among the disciples meant ruling over the rest. They wanted corner offices in the messianic administration.

Jesus told them they did not know what they were asking. Then he posed a question: "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" Both images spoke of suffering. In the Old Testament, the cup frequently symbolized one's appointed destiny, often a destiny of judgment or suffering. Baptism evoked being overwhelmed, plunged into deep waters of calamity. Jesus was not asking whether they could handle a little difficulty; he was asking whether they could endure what he was about to endure.

James and John answered confidently: "We can." Their self-assurance echoed Peter's earlier insistence that he would never fall away. They believed they could handle whatever came. Jesus agreed that they would indeed drink his cup and share his baptism—both brothers would suffer for their association with him, and James would become the first apostle martyred. But Jesus could not grant their request for positions of honor. Those places belonged to those for whom they had been prepared. The seating arrangements in the kingdom were the Father's prerogative, not the Son's to distribute as favors.

There is bitter irony embedded in this exchange. James and John asked to sit at Jesus' right and left in his glory. Mark's readers knew that the only ones who would occupy those positions when Jesus was finally "enthroned" were the two criminals crucified beside him. The cross was Jesus' throne; his moment of greatest glory was his moment of greatest suffering. If James and John truly wanted to share his glory, they would need to understand that glory and suffering were not sequential stages—suffering was the glory. The Messiah's enthronement looked nothing like what they imagined.

The indignation of the ten (10:41)

When the other ten disciples heard what James and John had done, they became indignant. Their anger was not righteous. They were not upset because James and John had been insensitive to Jesus' pain or because the request revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the kingdom. They were angry because James and John had tried to secure an advantage. The other ten wanted those positions too. The request exposed ambition that infected the entire group, not just two brothers.

This was not the first time the disciples had argued about greatness. After the second passion prediction, they had debated among themselves who was the greatest. Jesus had responded by placing a child in their midst and teaching that welcoming the least was the path to true honor. That lesson had not penetrated. The disciples remained trapped in

conventional categories of power and prestige, jockeying for position even as their master walked toward execution.

Jesus teaches on true greatness (10:42–44)

Jesus gathered the twelve and addressed the conflict directly. He began by describing how the world operated: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them." The phrase "those who are regarded as rulers" was subtly dismissive. Earthly rulers appeared powerful, but their authority was delegated and temporary. They maintained their positions through intimidation, image management, and force. This was the model the disciples had absorbed—the assumption that greatness meant having others serve you, that leadership meant exercising power over subordinates.

Jesus rejected this model completely: "Not so with you." The kingdom of God operated by different rules. Whoever wanted to become great must become a servant. Whoever wanted to be first must become slave of all. The terms escalated deliberately. A servant worked for others; a slave had no rights, no independent agenda, no claim to personal advancement. The path to prominence in God's kingdom ran in exactly the opposite direction from the path to prominence in the world.

This was not merely an inversion of worldly values for its own sake. Jesus was not saying that the last would be first simply to overturn expectations. He was revealing something about the nature of God's kingdom itself. The kingdom was not a realm where different people occupied the top positions; it was a realm where the very concept of "top" was redefined. Greatness meant service. Honor belonged to those who gave themselves for others. The disciples were not being told to wait their turn for power; they were being told that power as they understood it had no place among Jesus' followers.

The Son of Man came to serve (10:45)

Jesus grounded his teaching in his own mission: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This single sentence explained both the nature of true greatness and the purpose of Jesus' death. The Son of Man—the glorious figure from Daniel 7 who would receive dominion, glory, and an everlasting kingdom—came not to be served but to serve. If the exalted one chose the posture of a servant, how could his followers justify seeking positions of power?

But Jesus went further. He did not merely come to serve; he came to give his life as a ransom. The word "ransom" carried specific connotations in the ancient world. It was the price paid to free a prisoner of war, to redeem a slave, to release someone from debt they

could not pay. A ransom implied captivity, helplessness, and the intervention of someone with resources the captive lacked. Jesus was saying that his death would accomplish liberation for those who could not liberate themselves.

The background for this statement was Isaiah 53, the portrait of the Suffering Servant who would bear the sins of many and make his life an offering for guilt. The Servant in Isaiah poured out his life unto death and was numbered with transgressors, yet through his suffering the many would be justified. Jesus was claiming this role for himself. The Son of Man and the Suffering Servant were the same person. The one who would receive the kingdom was the one who would give his life for others.

The phrase "for many" indicated both substitution and benefit. Jesus died in place of others and for their sake. The contrast was between the one and the many: one life given so that many could be freed. This was the logic of atonement—a payment made by someone who owed nothing on behalf of those who owed everything. The disciples wanted to know who would sit at Jesus' right and left. Jesus wanted them to understand that his mission was to die so that others might live.

This verse stands as the theological center of Mark's Gospel. Everything Jesus had done—his teaching, his healings, his exorcisms, his confrontations with religious leaders—was subordinate to this purpose. He came to give his life. The road to Jerusalem was the road to a cross, and the cross was not a tragic interruption of Jesus' mission but its fulfillment. The disciples who wanted to share his glory needed to understand that his glory was displayed precisely in his self-giving death. There was no other path to the kingdom.

Application

1. Following Jesus means walking toward suffering, not around it

Jesus walked ahead of his disciples toward Jerusalem, knowing exactly what awaited him there. He did not seek an easier path or negotiate better terms. The disciples were astonished and afraid because they sensed where this road led—and they were right to be alarmed. Following Jesus has never meant avoiding difficulty; it means walking the same direction he walked. Christians who expect their faith to insulate them from suffering have misread the Gospels. Jesus promised his followers they would drink his cup and share his baptism. The path to glory runs through the cross, not around it.

2. Ambition for position reveals misunderstanding of the kingdom

James and John wanted seats of honor. The other ten were angry because they wanted those seats too. The entire group was infected with the same disease: they measured

greatness by proximity to power. This impulse did not disappear when the church was born. Christians still jockey for position, seek recognition, and resent those who receive honors we wanted. Jesus did not condemn the desire to be great—he redirected it. Greatness in his kingdom is real, but it looks like service. Those who pursue prominence by worldly means have not understood where they are or whom they follow.

3. The world's model of leadership has no place among Jesus' followers

Jesus drew a sharp line: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... Not so with you." The contrast was absolute. Worldly leaders maintain power through control, intimidation, and image management. They expect to be served. Jesus' followers operate by opposite principles. Servant leadership is not a technique for more effective management; it is the only form of leadership that belongs in the kingdom. Churches that adopt worldly models of power—celebrity pastors, authoritarian structures, leaders who demand deference—have imported values Jesus explicitly rejected.

4. Jesus' death was not an accident but a ransom

The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many. This was not tragedy but purpose. Jesus' death accomplished something that no human effort could achieve: liberation for those held captive by sin and unable to pay their own debt. The ransom metaphor implies our helplessness and his sufficiency. We were prisoners who could not free ourselves; he paid what we could not pay. But there is a catch: those who are ransomed belong to the one who freed them. We are not our own. We were bought with a price, and our lives now belong to the one who gave his life for us.

Conclusion

The disciples wanted to know who would sit at Jesus' right and left. Mark's original readers knew the answer: two criminals, crucified beside him. The positions of honor the disciples coveted were occupied by condemned men dying on crosses. This was the Messiah's enthronement—not a gilded throne in Jerusalem but a Roman execution outside its walls.

Jesus did not reject the disciples' desire for greatness; he transformed it. Greatness in his kingdom was real, but it looked like service. Honor belonged to those who gave themselves for others. The path to the top ran downward—through humility, sacrifice, and the willingness to become slave of all. This was not a temporary inversion of values until the kingdom arrived; this was how the kingdom operated.

At the center of it all stood the cross. The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many. His death was not a tragic interruption of his mission but its fulfillment. He paid what

we could not pay, freed those who could not free themselves, and demonstrated once for all what true greatness looks like. Those who have been ransomed now belong to the one who freed them. We are not our own. And if we follow the one who gave his life for us, we will walk the same road he walked—toward suffering, through service, into glory.

Reflection

1. Where in your life are you seeking position rather than opportunities to serve?
2. How do you respond when others receive recognition you wanted?
3. Does your understanding of leadership reflect Jesus' model or the world's?
4. What would change if you truly believed you were bought with a price?
5. Are you walking toward difficulty with Jesus or seeking an easier path?
6. How does the ransom metaphor reshape your sense of identity and purpose?

Discussion

1. Why were the disciples astonished and afraid as Jesus walked toward Jerusalem?
2. What does the timing of James and John's request reveal about their understanding?
3. How does the irony of "right and left" at the crucifixion reshape the disciples' request?
4. Why did Jesus distinguish between Gentile rulers and how his followers should operate?
5. What is the relationship between the Son of Man in Daniel 7 and the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53?
6. How does verse 45 function as the theological center of Mark's Gospel?