

Mark 10:35-45

## How to Become Great

There is a true story about six kids who got shipped wrecked of the island of Tonga in the 1960's. They were from a boarding school and decided that they wanted an adventure so they stole a boat and headed off. The long and the short of it is they were not well prepared, ended up in a storm and were shipwrecked on a small rock island for a year. What to me is so incredible about their story is that it was through cooperation and servanthood that they survived a year together on the island. Writer Rutger Bregman talks about this story on the podcast *Throughline*, in an episode called *Chaos*. He says,

So [the boys] worked together in teams of two - two to be on the lookout for ships continuously, to tend to the garden because they sort of started planting food and crops, et cetera, and two to cook. That was sort of how they worked. Did they have fights? Well, obviously they had. But what's really amazing here is that when there was a fight, they had this policy that one would go to one side of the island. The other would go to the other side of the island. They would cool off a little bit and then, after a couple of hours, come back and say sorry.<sup>1</sup>

If you want to learn more about that story you can Google "The Real-life Lord of the Flies"<sup>2</sup>, but the point is this group of young men managed to survive not by tearing one another down, or fighting, but by cooperating and serving one another. So often we are led to believe, through media, politics, and business, that to get ahead means that you have to leave someone or something behind, that power and prestige are things to strive for above the cost to another human being.

Wars have led us to believe that someone always has to be in control of power. Politicians at odds with one another can nearly cripple a government as those in power want to keep their power, when working together, finding solutions rather than belittling one another would bring about needed and lasting change the world over. Having experienced the US elections not so many months ago, our own national elections merely weeks ago, and the signs of a provincial election in our future, one can get tired of the rhetoric, the put-downs, and mud-slinging, longing and hoping that there could be a future where people learn to work together for the good of all.

It feels as if, no matter where one looks, we are bombarded with images and messages that suggests that you are only somebody if you have power, prestige, fame or glory,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/977526130>. Accessed October 15, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYebOCCoTYM>. Accessed October 15, 2021

and money to buy whatever you want. It seems this is human nature, even the sons of Zebedee were bold enough to come forward to Jesus and try to bargain their way into the power they thought was a part of the revolution they assumed Jesus was going to lead. They said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Rather presumptuous of them I'd say. They continue, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

They are oblivious to what they are asking, which is wild if you put this whole conversation in context. Just prior to this ask, Jesus has pronounced what is understood as his third passion prediction – in other words, Jesus has predicted his death describing the kind of death he is to face. The story goes in verses 32-34(NRSV) that Jesus "took the twelve disciples aside and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him, and after three day he will rise again.'"

I have a feeling the only part they heard was that Jesus will rise again. As Jesus said, they do not know what they are asking. After James and John have asked their question, Jesus responds with "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Of course, they reply yes, which leads one to believe they didn't hear any of the part about being mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed. They just want to be great and important.

When the other ten heard this, they were incensed, angry that James and John would think they should be the ones to be honoured in such a way. At different points in the Gospel of Mark, the disciples take turns in misunderstanding what it means to follow Jesus. They want to control his power, lead him in the way they understand things should go. They didn't get that Jesus' whole life was about serving others, not having power over them, even though he could.

Jesus says to his disciples, "You know that among the Gentiles [these would be the people who do not believe in the God of the Hebrews] those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but [...but] whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." And here is the kicker, "for the Son of Man [Jesus] came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Now we can be pretty smug about the disciples and their thick headedness, but how many of us secretly long to be served rather than to serve, would rather be honoured than to put others in a place of honour, covet the fame and fortune of the rich and famous whether actors or the head of a Fortune 500 company. And yet Jesus words ring as true today as they did back then, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Remember this is not doormat obedience where you allow people to walk all over you, but it is a choice to think of another and their needs, and then find ways to help meet that need.

To be a disciple of Christ means that you will serve God first, your family, your community, the community of faith, and the community in which you live. Interestingly enough, it is in serving that we heal brokenness, our own and that of others. It is the example of Jesus' ministry of service that will bring about wholeness in community...in life. We get to be a part of that, we need to pay attention to our behaviours, our thoughts, our desires as see how those lines up with Jesus' ministry of servanthood. In the kingdom of God if you want to be great then start by serving others in whatever small and big ways you think God might be asking of you.

And that's a point to remember, this is not about serving as others might think we should, but to find how God is calling us to care for the needs of those who are on the margins, who are down-trodden, who are ill, broke or broken-hearted. God may bring someone into your life to help you discern or to guide you, but it is always about seeking God's will, and seeing how what you are choosing to do, how you are living, lines up with Jesus' ministry of service to others.

May you be bold in your service, yet kind in your words and actions, remembering that God is using you to change the world. Now that is being great! Amen.