

**Sermon File # 850**

**Scripture Text: Mark 10:35-45**

**Sermon Title: Why Jesus Came: *He Came to Serve Us***

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## **Why Jesus Came: *He Came to Serve Us***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles to today's text, Mark 10:35-45. This past Sunday I began a series of sermons for this Advent Season, "Why Jesus Came." Last week we noted, from John 1:9-13, that Jesus came to give himself to us. Christ, the eternal Word and Son of God came to earth, and though he is the Co-Creator, he was unrecognized by unbelievers and even rejected by many of his own people of the Old Covenant of Israel. But to those of us who believe in and who have received him as Lord and Savior, "he gave the right to be called the children of God" (John 1:12).

Today we consider one of the statements of Christ Jesus declaring why he came to earth. From our text we will note that Jesus came to serve us. The context of this saying of Jesus is remarkably disturbing. Jesus had just finished predicting, as he had done on numerous previous occasions, his approaching arrest, condemnation, execution and then his resurrection (Mark 10:32-34). Obviously the disciples had either ignored or misunderstood Jesus' prediction and making a quantum leap in the conversation, James and John made a remarkably inappropriate and insensitive request of Jesus. They asked Jesus to do them a favor by promising them a place of privilege in the kingdom of God. This was an occasion for Jesus to explain the reason he came to earth—to be our servant.

Read **Mark 10:35-45**.

Christmas is the season for us as followers of Christ to celebrate his incarnation, the eternal Son's taking human flesh. We do well to understand the purpose of his coming. And in our text for today Jesus tells us that he came to be our servant. And we all know that, of all seasons of the year, the real meaning of the Christmas Season is likely to be lost.

The great Christian scholar and writer CS Lewis wrote in his *Letters to an American Lady*, "I feel exactly as you do about the horrid commercial racket they have made out of Christmas. I send no cards and give no presents except to children" (27 November, 1953, page 50). And in another of his letters he wrote, "Just a hurried line...to tell a story which puts the contrast between *our* feast of the Nativity and all this ghastly "Xmas" racket at its lowest. My brother," continued Lewis, "heard a woman on a bus say, as the bus passed a church with a Crib (crèche) outside it, 'Oh Lor'! They bring religion into everything. Look—they're dragging it even into Christmas now!'" (above citation, 29 December 1958, page 80).

Yes, I hope to drag a little religion, something of biblical faith, into our thoughts about Christmas this Advent Season. And nothing is more important than listening to what Jesus himself says, since Christmas is the celebration of his birth. In our text he says that the reason he came, thus the reason we celebrate Christmas, is the fact that he came to serve. Jesus' life of service has made an everlasting difference in our lives, and he calls us to follow his example as we too live a life of serving others.

Jesus came in order to serve and the first thing we note from our text is...

➤ **Jesus' serving is unlike the pagan and religious world**

Our text tells us that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus asking a favor. They assumed, by ignoring or misunderstanding what Jesus had taught them earlier about greatness through humble service, that prestigious positions in the coming kingdom of God were now open to the first applicants. They still, despite what Jesus had been saying about the nature of his kingdom, that they were about to become part of a radically new political kingdom, over which Jesus would reign triumphant over their enemies, including the occupying Roman forces. Thus James and John wanted to be first to ask Jesus to give them a place on his right hand, as second in command of the kingdom, and also on his left, as second in command.

Matthew's account tells us that their mother, perhaps Salome (John 19:25), was their intermediary, asking this favor for her sons, James and John. Like any

good mother, she wanted what was best for her boys (Matthew 20:20-21); and how proud she would have been, to have had her sons at Jesus' right and left hand!

I'm reminded of the lady who bragged to her friends about her son's important new job that put him over some 500 people. Little did her friends know that her son's job was mowing the grass in a 500-grave cemetery! In the eyes of God the work of a gardener is no lower than that of a company executive and to him a gardener can be a greater person than a head of state. But even as followers of Christ we often love what the fallen world loves, such as "the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what [we have and do]" 1 John 2:15-17).

In contrast to what Jesus says about true greatness through service, let's note...

- *Greatness vs. service in the eyes of the world*

James and John were evidencing the influence of the surrounding culture upon their thinking and ambition. Greco-Roman culture despised the characteristic of humility, which was not considered a virtue but rather a weakness. Like the culture around them, these brothers were ambitious to have positions of power, prestige and worldly importance. Later in our text Jesus articulates this difference when he refers to the way the rulers of the Gentiles "lord it over" their subjects by exercising the raw power given by rank and privilege (verse 42).

But yet James and John were men who had left their occupation as fishermen and had been following Jesus, so we must ask, what about the choice between...

- *Service or ambition in the life of the church?*

Ironically, as the disciples followed Jesus toward his cross, they seemed to become more infected with this worldly idea of greatness and the ambition for success as the world views it. In chapter 9, we find Jesus asking the disciples what they had been arguing about. Their response was shameless silence, but Jesus knew that they had been arguing about "who was the greatest." And so, patiently and lovingly, Jesus sat down, called the twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:33-35). Obviously they hadn't learned very well, because we find them once again seeking places of prominence, where they would be regarded as great in the eyes of others. After Jesus' reminder of his looming execution and resurrection, still they were obsessed with their personal ambition.

This worldly desire for power, prestige and control over others has been a problem in the kingdom since these first disciples and the first century church. James calls the kind of "wisdom" that is based on pride "devilish" (James 3:15). He notes that those in the church who "harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition" in their hearts are thinking like the fallen world and even the devil himself. And he

notes that “where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (James 3:13-18). The spiritual health and unity of a local church or any Christian organization is always ruined by this envy and selfish ambition of those who have failed to understand the heart of Christ, which is one of humble service and of preferring one another in love. The worst kind of power struggles often are those in a church, where people often live out their personal ambitions and desires for power and control, usually when they feel powerless and unsuccessful in their jobs or marriages.

Jesus used this request for personal ambition as an opportunity to teach the disciples that what they desired, a sense of significance and a share in Jesus’ glorious reign, is a...

- *Glory only by the way of the cross*

I suppose there is something inherent within us children of God that causes us to yearn for the glory, power and significance of the kingdom of God. We are God’s children, thus we are children of the King and we thereby have a share in kingdom glory. But this is a deferred glory, not to be gained by personal power or a drive for success in the eyes of the world. We indeed are destined for glory and we will reign with Christ forever and ever (Revelation 22:5).

But then the Gospel clearly says that the way to this final and future glory is the way of the cross. Jesus had to suffer and die for us as a prelude to his glory in heaven and his everlasting reign. And we also must take the way of the cross, our cross of weakness, self-denial and obedience to Christ and willingness to suffer for the sake of his name. Thus Jesus told James and John they really did not understand what they were asking (verse 38). He then asked if they were able to drink his cup and share his baptism (verse 38). The cup represented the cup of the wrath of God against sin. Jesus would have to drink that cup of suffering in his crucifixion. He would bear the sin of the world. His baptism and theirs would be total immersion in a life of tribulation. Thus Jesus asked if James and John were ready to follow him in a life of suffering and self-denial (See James A Brooks, *The New American Commentary: Mark*, page 168).

Although they glibly replied that they were able to share his suffering, Jesus replied that indeed they would suffer. James would become, as we see in the Book of Acts, the first of the disciples to be martyred, when executed by King Herod (Acts 12:2). John was tortured and exiled to the Isle of Patmos in AD 95. But also Jesus said that the places of special honor would be conferred by the heavenly Father, in the right time and way. Perhaps Jesus was implying that the Father would confer everlasting glory in the consummated kingdom upon those who were focused on the way of the cross, who were faithfully living a cruciform life of self-denial and obedience witness and service to the glory of Christ. And James and John were not necessarily eliminated from the list of candidates for the most Christ-like, cross carrying life. The Book of Revelation gives special

prominence to the faithful martyrs (Revelation 6:9, etc.). Jesus noted that the Father knows who are the faithful ones. And a life of faithful surrender and death to self and living in humble trust in Christ is the life prepared for future glory, even as the Father prepares those places (verse 40).

This Christmas season, as we think of the reasons Christ Jesus came to earth, let's consider one of the reasons he clearly articulated. Verse 10 of our text expresses the truth that...

➤ **Jesus' serving is undeserved, desperately needed and humbly received**

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (verse 10).

In this fallen world, that had become so self-centered and self-serving, Christ Jesus came to serve us, giving what we so desperately need but could never deserve. And in this service...

- *He took "the very nature of a servant"*

The Apostle Paul expressed so well Jesus' coming to serve us, writing or quoting a hymn, that Christ Jesus...

"being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God  
something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself

and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

Christ Jesus, the eternal Son of God, entered this sinful, needy world in order to rescue us from our captivity to sin, death and our condemnation to eternal separation from God in hell. Jesus spoke of his serving us by being our ransom sacrifice. He gave his life to purchase our liberation from bondage. Jesus is employing the language of one who purchases the freedom of another, who has been condemned to a life of slavery. He the sinless one would become the sacrifice to pay for the sins of us guilty ones. As Paul wrote,

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

In our text Jesus perhaps was alluding to the prophecy of Isaiah hundreds of years before who wrote,

“For the transgression of my people he was stricken...

Though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

“Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and to cause him to suffer”... and...

“By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,

And he will bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 53:8-12).

Note that Jesus said he did not come to be served. He needed nothing from us but...

- *We desperately need his service*

Jesus came into the world to serve us through his death and then by his resurrection to give us the gift of eternal life. We desperately need what he has done for us.

A British teacher, Gillion Gibbons, was released last week from a Sudanese prison, having received a presidential pardon from a sentence of corporeal punishment (40 lashes) and possible imprisonment for months for allowing the school children to name the class teddy bear, “Mohammed.” What joy she expressed upon her release!

Unlike the judgment against Ms Gibbons, we deserve our condemnation. And someone actually took our punishment upon him. Jesus gave us complete forgiveness and has given to all who acknowledge and repent of sin a sentence of “not guilty.” And...

- *All we can do is receive his free gift*

Jesus says that he did not come to be served. That means there is absolutely nothing we can do to deserve or to earn this pardon and forgiveness we so desperately need. We cannot “serve” him by our merits, efforts, or acquired knowledge. All we can do is admit our need, our undeserving and our helplessness in facing a holy God and the dreadful possibility of everlasting banishment from his presence.

Paul makes this grace issue very clear when he says that even faith, the faith to believe in Jesus and to turn from sin to trust in God, is the free gift of God. “It is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus gave his life to ransom us from our bondage to sin and death and has ransomed us to a life of serving him and of serving with him. Thus...

➤ **Jesus calls us to follow and join him in serving**

We, the ransomed, are indeed no longer our own. We belong to Christ the Ransom-payer. And the construction of this 10<sup>th</sup> verse indicates a “how-much-more” argument. “For *even the Son of Man* did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” It’s as though Jesus is saying, “If I came to serve you, how much more should you, my ransomed people, live to serve others!” .

Demosthenes, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC Athenian orator and statesman, noted that the law decreed that one who is ransomed becomes the property of the one who paid the ransom (David Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*, page 418). And Paul the Apostle echoes this thought when he writes that we who are ransomed are no longer our own. We “were bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Although we are saved/ransomed by grace alone, that grace is not cheap. It wasn’t for Jesus and it isn’t cheap for us either. It costs us our self-centered lives. Now we belong to Jesus and we are accountable to follow him as Lord and to join him in his service to the world.

Jesus made this salvation-discipleship-service connection when he said, “I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:24-26).

We are not autonomous servants, “doing our own thing for God; rather, we are servants of God, serving alongside Jesus in work he is calling us to do with him. And he is...

- *Our example and enabler*

Just before his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, giving a dramatic portrait of servant-hood. Traditionally the servant washed his master’s feet, but in this instance Jesus reversed the roles and took a towel and a basin of water and washed the feet of his disciples, demonstrating the truth of our text, that indeed he had come to serve us as Savior and supreme Servant. Peter demurred at Jesus’ washing his feet, but Jesus insisted that he must submit to Jesus’ washing, his saving and cleansing power. But also, Jesus washed the feet of the disciples to give them and us an example of the attitude we must have toward one another (John 13:1-17).

It doesn’t come naturally for us to serve others in humility. As we’ve noted, it’s a very cross-cultural, yea, anti-cultural thing to do. And sometimes it’s even at odds with “church thinking.” What we need is the mind/attitude of Christ. For this

reason Paul upheld Jesus' example of service to the church in Philippi, which was disturbed by divisiveness, selfish ambition and vain conceit, with everyone looking after his or her own interests (Philippians 2:3f). As a corrective to this worldly thinking in the church Paul exhorted the Philippian believers to have the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, exemplified in the passage about Jesus' self-emptying, taking the nature of a servant and humbling himself in obedience to death on the cross (Phil. 2:5-8, cited above). The mind of Christ doesn't come naturally, but is the work of regenerating grace in the life of those of us who are following Jesus as Lord. Jesus enables us to have a mind like his but also he calls us...

- *To be great in service*

The aspiration for greatness is something inherently human. As we've noted, there is the fallen worldly type of greatness we as believers must eschew. But there's a kingdom greatness to which we may aspire. This idea of kingdom greatness may be what Jesus referred to when he said that "the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he, i.e. John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). Also, there's the idea that in the kingdom of God we now participate in the "greater" work of the Holy Spirit, doing greater things than were done during Jesus' earthly ministry (John 14:12). The greatness that Jesus calls us to is being a part of his great work of the Spirit, with an attitude of greater servant-hood, which is true kingdom greatness in the eyes of God. It's a call to kingdom of God significance rather than to worldly or even churchly success.

As AW Tozer wrote, "The essence of (Jesus') teaching is that true greatness lies in character, not in ability or position. Men in their blindness had always thought that superior talents made a man great, and so the vast majority believe (sic) today. To be endowed with unusual abilities in the field of art or literature or music or statecraft, for instance, is thought to be in itself an evidence of greatness, and the man thus endowed is hailed as a great man. Christ taught, and by His life demonstrated, that greatness lies deeper" (page 50, *Born after Midnight: Timeless Perspectives on Godly Living*).

I was deeply moved by reading Mother Teresa's *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta."* What was so impressive was her consistent commitment to honor Jesus through of life of complete obedience. She had vowed to never withhold anything Jesus might ask and to always willingly receive whatever he gives, including serving him in the darkest places of the poorest of India's poor. What spoke so powerfully was her focus on loving and obeying Jesus, even when she experienced deep emotional loneliness and spiritual darkness. She identified her experiences with the suffering of Jesus and vicariously experienced Jesus' "thirst for souls." What resulted from the life of Mother Teresa is a legacy of a life lived in service to others and deep, abiding love for Jesus, regardless of the apparent void of the sense of Jesus' love for her. She was consumed with an obsession that she was living out Jesus'

teaching that to minister to the sick, lonely and dying was to minister to Jesus himself (Matthew 25:31-46). What God was doing all along through Teresa's simple life of obedience was shaping in her life a close replication of the character of Jesus' own greatness.

### **Conclusion:**

And so, Jesus says we too can achieve greatness through service. He uses the words *diakonos* and *doulos*, servant and slave, to describe our calling. A servant was one called to do ordinary and humble tasks, such as waiting on tables. The truly great Christian is one who does what needs to be done to encourage others and to demonstrate love. The great servant works and gives with no thought for recognition. A slave is one who belongs to his or her master and is totally answerable to and dependent upon the master. A contemporary Christian slave is totally dependent on Jesus and has no life except a life for Christ and his glory.

Jesus came to us to be our servant, to do what we desperately needed but could never provide for ourselves. We cannot add to or improve on his ministry to us. All we can do is humbly receive Jesus as our Servant Savior and trust him alone for our salvation ransom. This is the way to celebrate Christmas, by receiving Christ as our Servant.

But receiving his salvation gift means that we become his servants and slaves, and are totally dependent on and answerable to him, just as was Jesus to the heavenly Father. May we all die to worldly and even churchly ambition today! As God would have it by his providential timing, in a few moments we members of IBC (with full membership) will vote on a by-laws change that will provide for the ministry of deacons, that is, servants. But also there is no member of IBC who is not also called to be a servant and a slave of Christ Jesus. My prayer as pastor is that I might be a more faithful servant and that God might use me to lead us to be a faithfully serving people; serving, not for personal pride or selfish ambition, but out of love for Christ Jesus and his people, in whom he dwells.

**Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. What does the request of James and John tell us about their expectations of the kingdom of God?
2. How is their request for seats of prominence in the kingdom a reflection of the world's concept of greatness?
3. What are some ways that you have seen this striving for power and prominence reflected in the life of the local church and/or other Christian organizations?
4. What does Jesus say is the necessary prelude and path to glory and honor in the kingdom of God?
5. What was the essence of Jesus' service to the world and to us, which he came to bring in his incarnation?
6. How do you think that we can receive and develop a desire to be great in service?
7. How would you describe a church that is seeking to be great in service?

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