

# JESUS' SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Mark 10:32-52

Key Verse: 10:45

**“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.”**

In this passage Jesus teaches what true greatness is, and how to be great. Everyone wants to be great. The desire to be great is not bad. It is part of our God-given humanity. As beings made in God's image, we long to be great, as God is great (Gen 1:27). As God told Abraham, **“I will make your name great”** (Gen 12:2), so he wants us to live great and meaningful lives, not just fulfill the American dream. The problem is that many people do not know what true greatness is. They only know the worldly greatness, which is hierarchical power. They seize opportunities to climb the ladder of success. A few people succeed, but most people fail. Many are wounded, hurt and embittered. People are suffering in this hierarchical system. It seems as though there is no way out. But there is. In today's passage Jesus shows us that anyone and everyone can become great. Let's learn from Jesus.

**First, the request of James and John (32-41).** Jesus and his disciples were on their way up to Jerusalem. Jesus was leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid (32a). Jesus was well aware of his impending suffering and death. No one wants to suffer and die. But this was God's will for the Messiah, and Jesus was resolute in obedience. He did not shrink back, or turn to the right or to the left. As the disciples witnessed Jesus' determination and raw courage to enter enemy territory, they were astonished. The atmosphere was tense, and those following Jesus were frightened. Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him (32b). This is the third passion prediction, and it is more specific than the first or second. Jesus would be condemned by the Jewish leaders and be executed by Gentiles—that is, crucified. Before his crucifixion, he would be mocked, spit on and flogged—that is, beaten severely with a whip. Jesus revealed the manner of his suffering and death in progressive detail to his disciples.

Why did Jesus keep talking about this, even though the disciples did not want to hear about it? Jesus wanted to prepare their minds for what was to come and to help them accept the gospel from their hearts. It was essential that they

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accept his suffering, death and resurrection; this would be the focal point of their faith and the content of their message. So Jesus repeated it again and again, even when they were too afraid to ask him about it. Here we learn an important lesson. In raising disciples of Jesus, including our children, really essential teachings—especially the way of the cross—must be repeated, even though it scares people and makes them very uncomfortable. Like Jesus, we need to share both grace and truth. But Jesus' death was not the end. Three days later, he rose from the dead. Through his resurrection he conquered sin, death and injustice, and won eternal victory.

As Jesus spoke of this serious event, what were the disciples thinking? James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus and said, **“Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask”** (35). We can sense an attitude of entitlement in these two favored disciples. They were demanding, as if Jesus owed them something. It is not easy to bear such people. We might feel that they need to be sent to a North Korean training camp. But what did Jesus do? He said, **“What do you want me to do for you?”** (36) Despite their selfishness and immaturity, Jesus was ready to do whatever would be good for them. Spurred on by Jesus' generosity, they quickly replied, **“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory”** (37). Let's try to understand James and John. As they approached Jerusalem, they became anxious. They tried not to think of Jesus' suffering and death. They expected him to soon establish his kingdom, appointing his cabinet members. They wanted to become the top leaders, because they were ambitious. But always, Peter was ahead of them. Realizing that they would not obtain the top positions based on their performance, they colluded with each other for the purpose of defeating Peter. This is not just their problem, but can be our problem too. Wherever we go, “Peter” is there. Some people try to escape from “Peter” by moving to another place. But they find “Peter” there too.

When Jesus heard James and John's reply, he must have been surprised at their worldly desire and sneaky method of working. Yet he was still patient with them and had hope for them. Jesus wanted them to realize that there was a cost to having such a position. Jesus said, **“You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”** (38). Here “the cup” and “baptism” refer to Jesus' suffering and death. Jesus was willing to share his glory with them if they would also participate in his suffering. Completely misunderstanding Jesus, they said, **“We can.”** They felt ready to do anything to get what they really wanted. Surprisingly, Jesus accepted

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their answer, saying, **“You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with...”** (39). As Jesus predicted, they both participated in his suffering. James became the first martyr among the Twelve (Ac 12:2). John suffered much and was exiled on the island of Patmos for Christ (Rev 1:9). However, Jesus could not promise them seats at his right and left; that depended on God's sovereign will (40). When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John (41). It was because they had the same desire for positions and felt outsmarted. This matter had begun to divide Jesus' disciples and they were in danger of forming factions. Competition is not always bad; it can stimulate us to produce the best result, if we desire to please God. But if competition is driven by selfish ambition, it has serious consequences: jealousy, strife, division, hatred, bitterness and dissension. It dishonors God and destroys Christian communities. Then Christ's name is blasphemed among unbelievers. So Paul said, **“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit”** (Php 2:3). Let's take this warning to heart.

**Second, Jesus' servant leadership (42-45).** How did Jesus deal with this? Instead of being upset, Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach his disciples servant leadership. Jesus called them together and said, **“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them”** (42). In the world, to become a great leader means having power and exercising it. This power can be political, military or economic. There is also a saying that “knowledge is power.” People gain this power through hard work, skillful maneuvering and dedication. In the process, they see others as competitors. They are often willing to trample on others to advance their own position. Once they gain power, they use any means to keep it. So there is always a power struggle going on. People can betray each other when it is advantageous. There are no real friendships. No one can be trusted. There is always tension, which leads to great stress, migraine headaches and heart palpitations. People have no peace, and can hardly sleep. The disciples knew about all this very well and blamed the Gentile rulers. Still, they were becoming just like them.

Jesus said to them, **“Not so with you”** (43a). What does this mean? It means that their mindset, value system and lifestyle should be different from Gentile rulers. Jesus introduced a totally different concept of leadership in the Christian community. How should they be different? Jesus said, **“Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all”** (43-44). Jesus did not nullify their desire to become

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great. Rather, he taught them how to become truly great. The word “whoever” means this is a general principle which applies universally. It indicates that anyone willing to practice his teaching can become great. It is not limited to a few people, as it is in the power hierarchy. Anyone and everyone can be great. The problem is how. Jesus said, **“must be your servant”** and **“must be slave of all.”** **“Servant”?** **“Slave of all”?** What? Here Jesus urges us to learn the attitude of a servant or a slave in order to become great. This was revolutionary. In Plato’s “Republic,” written about 400 years before Christ, Socrates’ ideal civilization was characterized by four virtues: wisdom, courage, moderation and justice. Under Plato’s influence, those who wanted to be leaders tried to cultivate these virtues. At that time, servants and slaves were hardly regarded as human beings; they were living tools. It was unthinkable for one with the attitude of a servant or slave to be a leader. Servantship was not regarded as a virtue, but a burdensome duty. However, since Jesus introduced servantship as the most important virtue to become a leader, many have pursued it. These days, high officials are often called “public servants.” The motto of Chicago police is “to serve and protect.” Especially, this is the most essential quality for a Christian leader.

Hearing Jesus’ words must have shocked his disciples. As difficult as they were to hear, they are even harder to practice. They needed an example. Jesus set the example. Let’s read verse 45. **“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.”** The word **“even”** is significant. As the title Son of Man indicates, Jesus is the Messiah (Da 7:13-14). He is in very nature God, who is worthy of all honor and praise and service from all human beings. He could be the exception to this teaching. But even Jesus became a servant. Therefore, there is no exception; anyone and everyone who wants to be great must learn servantship. Servantship is grounded in humility. Humility is not just a means to attain a goal. Humility is neither temporary, nor training for the next step. It is a mindset before God and the imitation of Christ on the most foundational level. So Apostle Paul urges believers: **“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...”** (Php 2:5). Jesus’ servant leadership began with how he saw himself. Though he is in very nature God, he did not think he should be equal with God. Rather, he gave up his rights and privileges as God, in an act of renunciation. Jesus set aside his power and glory and took on the weaknesses of human flesh. Even among human beings, Jesus became a servant, not a ruler. He said, **“I am among you as one who serves”** (Lk 22:27c). Jesus served his disciples, caring for them one by one, bearing all their weaknesses, and even washing their dirty feet (Jn

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13:5). Jesus said, **“I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you...you will be blessed if you do”** (Jn 13:15,17).

In order to serve others as he did, Jesus denied his desire to be served. Everyone wants to be valued by others and to feel important. Everyone wants to be respected by others and to be somebody. It is a deeply rooted human desire. Though Jesus was worthy of all honor, glory and praise from all human beings (Rev 5:12), he relinquished this desire. Rather, he served others. Serving is not just doing acts of service for others, like fixing their car or cleaning their house. Serving is not a means to become great. Serving has a much deeper meaning; it is to imitate Christ. To imitate Christ, we need to be changed on the inside. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse our sins and purify our hearts. Only Jesus living within us can enable us to serve as he did.

What, then, does it mean to serve? Servanthip has many aspects. Duane Elmer is an honorary Professor of International Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In his book, “Cross-Cultural Servanthood,” he describes elements of serving: openness, acceptance, trust, learning and understanding. These elements are interrelated. In order to serve someone, we need to open our hearts and welcome them so they may feel comfortable. We need to accept them as they are, even though they are quite different than us. Then they can feel that they are valued. We should build trust by respecting others as those made in God’s image. A sign of this trust is the sharing of something very personal. Regarding learning, we should not teach one-sidedly, but learn mutually. Learning from others signals humility and willingness to identify with them. Understanding comes as we learn from and with others. Without understanding, we can’t really serve people’s true needs because we don’t know them. Instead of helping, we may cause more damage. When all of these elements are present in our serving, we can say that we truly serve others. As we look at Jesus’ example, we find all these elements. Jesus served all kinds of people such as a demon-possessed man, a lonely, excluded Samaritan woman, a tax collector—a public sinner, and so many others. In order to serve mankind to the full measure, Jesus gave everything, even his own life, as a ransom for our sins. Jesus’ example of serving was the total sacrifice of himself. But Jesus’ sacrifice is more than an example. He ransomed us from the power of sin. Without being ransomed by Jesus, no one can be a servant leader. In order to be a servant leader, we must be set free from the power of sins, such as selfish ambition, self-glory seeking and vain conceit. Only then can we grow to be like

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Jesus as real servant leaders. So Jesus is not only the example, but also the means for us to be servant leaders.

Jesus' servanthship has had a huge impact on the world. So many people have followed Jesus' example and lived a truly great life. Take, for example, Abraham Lincoln. When he began his career as a lawyer, Edward Stanton opposed him in many ways. Once Stanton said, "We don't need to go to Africa to see a gorilla. If we go to Springfield, Illinois we meet Gorilla Lincoln." Stanton continued to attack Lincoln after the election, saying it was a "national disaster." Everyone noticed that he was Lincoln's enemy. Yet when Lincoln formed his Cabinet, he appointed Stanton as Secretary of War, the most important position at the time. Lincoln's aides strongly opposed this. Lincoln responded, "I don't care if he despises me 100 times. I cannot find such a qualified person as him to overcome this crisis." His aides responded, "Still, he is an enemy. We must get rid of him." Lincoln said with a smile, "I also think so. We should get rid of our enemies from our hearts. When we practice Jesus' words, 'Love your enemy,' we can make our enemies our friends. Then our enemy will be gone and we will earn a friend. We can kill two birds with one stone." Stanton became Lincoln's friend and coworker. He overcame many hardships during the Civil War and helped unite America. Later, when Lincoln was killed, Stanton was more sorrowful than others and said at his funeral, "Here the greatest man has been laid."

Jesus served not only his disciples, but also a nameless person as we see in verses 46-52. As Jesus passed through Jericho with his disciples and a large crowd, a blind man, Bartimaeus, was sitting by the roadside begging. His name means "son of Timaeus." He seemed to be nobody. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing through, he began to shout, "**Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!**" He must have heard that Jesus healed many incurable diseases, including blindness. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah. So he cried out for mercy. It seemed to be just one more voice in the crowd. Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet. But he was not hurt, nor discouraged, nor did he fall into self-pity. He must have realized that this was his one and only opportunity to draw Jesus' attention. So he shouted all the more, "**Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!**" His cry came from a mixture of desperation, hope and faith. This cry reached Jesus' ear. It is amazing that Jesus listened to this man. Jesus must have been sorry about his disciples' political ambition. He was overwhelmed by the thought of his impending suffering and death. It seemed he could have no room in his heart to listen to one seemingly useless person. Jesus not only heard his heart cry, but he

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stopped and called him. People must have been moved by Jesus' concern for this man, so they called to him, **“Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you”** (49b). Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus (50). Jesus asked, **“What do you want me to do for you?”** (51a) This is the servant's motto. He said, **“Rabbi, I want to see”** (51b). He could have asked for a big donation so he would not have to beg anymore. He could have asked for a position in the government so he would not be a nameless nobody any longer. But he asked to see. He asked based on his need, which is what he should ask for, in contrast to Jesus' disciples. Jesus blessed him, saying, **“Go, your faith has healed you.”** Immediately he received his sight and could see Jesus and followed him. One who serves a needy person with Christ's mindset is truly great. Thank God for so many among us who serve the needy with Christ's mindset, even though they are not recognized by people. Let's learn Jesus' servanthship until we grow to be like him.