

## **THE UPSIDE DOWN WAY OF JESUS**

**“Last is First”**

**Mark 10:35-45**

### **Introduction**

Leonard Bernstein, the great composer and orchestra conductor, was once asked, “which is the most difficult instrument to play?” Mr. Bernstein’s response- “Second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays *second* violin with as much enthusiasm, or *second* French horn or *second* flute, now that’s a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.”

In our humanness, every one wants to be first. We want to be at the front of the line....at the top of the list....at the head of the class....on the top rung of the ladder of success. We want the best seats in the house and preferred parking. The world’s way is to be first, to be number one, get to the top and work your way into the corner office. Success and notoriety are the names of the game.

But according to **The Upside Down Way of Jesus**, last is first. **Read Mark 10:31**. As we finish up this series today where we have looked at the countercultural teachings of Jesus, we will see that Jesus speaks about greatness in connection with His principle that the last are first.

Jesus measures true greatness in terms of service, not status. According to Jesus, greatness is measured by how many people you serve, not by how many serve you.

Today’s lesson, **read earlier by that great Phillies fan and our youth minister, Dave Peterson**, will show us how we can practice the last is first principle and be truly great in the eyes of our Lord.

First, let’s look at James and John’s request and consider.....

## 1. The Aspiration to Greatness

James and John did have such aspirations for themselves. They want to be first. They wanted the top two seats in Jesus' kingdom.

According to other Gospel accounts of this story, it was James and John's mother who put them up to asking Jesus for the best seats in His kingdom. Like most mothers, she just wanted to see her sons do well and get ahead. That's the part of my sermon that relates to Mother's Day!

James and John wanted to be number one. They aspired to greatness. But their attitude and approach was all wrong. Let's examine their request, Jesus' response and the reaction of the rest of the disciples.

The first thing I notice about James and John is that they were pretty prideful. They asked Jesus to do for them *whatever* they wanted. **Whatever!** That was pretty presumptuous of them, wasn't it?

But do we ever pray that way? God, please just give me *whatever* I want. Do we just expect God to rubber stamp our prayer requests? Do you expect God to just be your "Yes" God? The proper attitude when we pray is not- "do for me whatever I want". Rather it is "do with me whatever You want."

A second mistake that James and John made is that they did not understand what true greatness was. They thought that being first would make them great. They didn't understand that they needed to be last and they needed to serve in order to be great.

They also did not understand the price of leadership. When they made their request, Jesus responded by telling them that they did not understand what they were asking. He asked them if they could drink the cup that He would drink and be baptized with the baptism He was baptized with.

Both references, the cup and baptism, are references to suffering and death. **Remember when Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane about the cross. He prayed to the Father, "if possible, let this CUP pass from**

**Me.” The cup was a reference to the cross. The cup was symbolic of suffering and death.**

Baptism is too. **Today, we use the phrase, “baptism of fire”. That is a reference to a soldier’s first experience of fire in battle. We use the phrase to signify an initial difficult experience.** Spiritually, baptism is a death to self. In Christian baptism, we die to self and receive a new life from God.

So when Jesus told James and John that they would drink the same cup He would drink and be baptized with the baptism He was baptized with, Jesus was making a prediction about the suffering and death that James and John would endure. James and John thought that leadership and greatness were about sitting in the best seats. But real leadership and greatness exacts a high price. Leading is often times difficult.

In response to their request, Jesus did not say that the two seats on his right and his left do not exist. In fact, he acknowledges just the opposite. Those two special seats do in fact exist and they belong to those for whom they have been prepared. And Jesus said they were not His to grant. I take that to mean that God the Father will award those seats of honor in eternity. This is another piece of Scriptural evidence that rewards will be handed out once we get to heaven.

**That reminds me of the New York City cab driver and the minister who were standing in line at the Pearly Gates of Heaven. Peter welcomes the cab driver and points to a mansion on a hilltop. Peter tells the cab driver, “there’s your home.”**

**The minister couldn’t wait to see his home. Why, if a cab driver got a mansion, he couldn’t even begin to imagine how grand his home would be!**

**But when Peter greeted the minister, he pointed to a shack in the valley and Peter said, “there’s your home.” The preacher complained, “how come a cab driver gets a mansion and I, a preacher, only get a shack?”**

**Peter replied, “Well, preacher, you see, it’s like this. Up here in heaven, we award homes on the basis of results. When you preached, people slept. But when he drove, people prayed!”**

In heaven, we will receive rewards based on our service here on earth. And as James and John found out, the highest rewards will be reserved not for those who were great here on earth. They are reserved for those who serve the Lord with the greatest of humility.

James and John’s request upset the other 10 disciples. Mark wrote that they were indignant. They were really angry with James and John. Probably because they each were hoping for one of the top seats!

The disciples misunderstood the true concept of greatness. They thought that greatness was in being first. **You may recall that they later, in the Upper Room, argued over which of them was the greatest.** They misunderstood greatness the way the world misunderstands it. They thought you have to be first. That’s the world’s way.

But that’s not Jesus’ way. Now, it is interesting that Jesus did not dismiss their desire for greatness. Instead He simply redirects it as He redefines greatness for them and for us. He goes on to tell them how to truly be great: ***“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”***

According to the *Upside Down Way of Jesus*, greatness isn’t achieved by being # 1. Therefore, self-promotion won’t make you great. In fact look at what Jesus had to say about promoting your self:

***“The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” – Matthew 23:11-12***

James and John were humbled by Jesus when they came asking for the top seats in His kingdom. **When the disciples were arguing in the Upper Room over which of them was the greatest, Jesus humbled them by washing their feet.**

If your ambition is to be # 1 and you go about promoting yourself, you will be humbled. But if you humble yourself and serve, you will be rewarded. Sometimes in this life, but certainly in heaven.

James and John were trying to achieve greatness, but they were going about it all wrong. Sometimes we do too when we buy into the world's philosophy that you are great only when you are first. Let's look further at Jesus' definition of greatness as we examine.....

## **2. The Attitude for Greatness**

Jesus re-defined greatness in terms of being a servant. Instead of seeking to be first, we must be willing to be last. That's the ***Upside Down Way of Jesus*** and that's the way to be great in God's eyes.

Jesus was the greatest person who ever lived. Jesus was a servant. **At the Wedding of Cana, he honored His mother's request to do something because the host of the wedding reception had run out of wine. So, Jesus helped out by turning the water into wine.** When thousands of people were hungry, Jesus fed them. Jesus ministered to the sick and healed them. Jesus was a servant.

Now, don't get me wrong. It's not a sin to be successful in this world. Most of the time, success comes through talent and hard work. But we need to be careful when we do achieve a measure of success.

First, don't let it go to your head. Remain humble. Second, don't make success an all-consuming ambition or it will consume you and destroy you. Third, remember that your success is not found in your success. It's found in your service to others.

**Jim Collins, author of several business leadership books, including, *From Good to Great*, talks about "Level 5 Leaders". He found a striking similarity between leaders of great companies. They were humble, servant-type people.**

God measures greatness in terms of service. And so should we. Instead of trying to be first, we need to put others first. Paul gave us this instruction:

***“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.***

***“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” – Philippians 2:3-4***

We can not just look out for good old # 1. We have to think about others. That’s not the thinking of the world. The world says, look out for yourself to the exclusion of every one else.

**Bradford Cohen was a contestant on Donald Trump’s reality show, The Apprentice. He turned down his exemption from getting dismissed from the show. He did this as a gesture of support for his team leader. He assumed his performance would protect him for hearing the dreaded words, “You’re fired”. Bradford was mistaken. Donald Trump accused him of making a stupid mistake and Bradford was sent packing.**

That’s the world’s philosophy. Be # 1. Win at any costs. Look out only for yourself. Don’t concern yourself with what happens to someone else.

But what Donald Trump calls stupid, Jesus calls greatness. According To His Upside Down Way, you don’t just look out for yourself. You think about others. You don’t put yourself first. You put others first.

Humility is not where you think less about yourself. Humility is where you think about yourself less and you think about others more. That’s the attitude of a truly great person in God’s eyes.

Attitude leads to action. Let’s look at.....

### **3. The Acts of Greatness**

Acts of greatness are acts of service to others. Acts of kindness.

Now in order to serve others, you have to make the time and take the time to help others. Proverbs 3:28 says:

***“If you can help your neighbor now, don’t say, ‘Come back tomorrow, and then I’ll help you.’” – Proverbs 3:28***

Now we are all busy people. Our plates are normally full with a lot of commitments and a lot of activities. But we should never be too busy to help others.

Jesus wasn’t. Jesus always took time to minister to people. **When the disciples didn’t want Jesus to be bothered with parents bringing their children to Him, Jesus said, bring the children to me. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Jesus took the time to spend time with children.**

**A blind man by the name of Bartimaeus called out to Jesus as Jesus was leaving Jericho. Many people told Bartimaeus to quit shouting to Jesus. But Jesus told the people to bring the blind man to Him. Jesus gave Bartimaeus his sight. Jesus was not too busy to give sight to a blind man.**

We’re busy people. But one thing we need to be busy doing is to help other people.

If we are going to serve others, we need to simply meet the needs of others around us. Paul wrote:

***“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” – Galatians 6:10***

Opportunities exist all around us to help someone else. But if we are self-absorbed, thinking only about ourselves, we will be insensitive to the needs of others around us. We have to be considerate and think about other people. Look around your life. Who do you know that could use your help?

**Our daughter is a single working mom of our two adorable grandchildren. Gillian has become friends with an older lady in her neighborhood who has trouble getting out and getting around. Gillian will take Annabelle and**

**Owen down to visit with this lady, which just makes her day. Gillian will run errands for this lady. She goes grocery shopping for her.**

Is there an elderly person in your neighborhood who could use your help? Is there someone where you work who is lonely who could use your friendship? Do you know a single mom who could use someone to watch her kids so she could have some time for herself? We have several shut-ins from our church who would appreciate visits from you and friendship with you. If you are interested in doing that, I'll arrange it for you. Just talk with me.

We put ourselves last by putting others first. If we will just stop and think about someone other than ourselves, I am sure we can all find someone we can help out and minister to.

**John Wesley once said- "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can."** That my friends is *The Upside Down Way of Jesus*. Serving others is the mark of greatness.

Now as we go about our acts of service, there are a few principles that should guide us. One principle is that no act of service should be beneath us. In fact, a true heart of service is often revealed by our willingness to do the small, insignificant, menial tasks. We shouldn't consider ourselves too good to do those types of things.

**Jesus washed the disciples' feet. When Paul and his fellow shipmates were shipwrecked on the island of Malta, Paul set about gathering brushwood to build a fire to keep every one warm. I am sure that the great apostle was just as exhausted as every one else, but he did what people needed.**

Doing the small things to serve others reveals a big heart. Some people are willing to do great things to serve God. But a true servant of God is willing to do the not so great things to serve others. Jesus said:

***“And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” – Matthew 10:42***

Something as simple as giving a cup of cold water to a thirsty person is a significant act of service in Jesus’ eyes. Every act of service is significant and no act of service should be beneath us.

Another guiding principle is that every person is a person of worth in God’s eyes and is deserving of our service. In other words, we shouldn’t feel that we are better than anyone and therefore feel like we don’t have to serve them.

Jesus is our example here. Jesus is better than anyone and He served every one. He ministered to lepers, prostitutes and the tax collectors, the social outcasts of His day. Paul wrote this in Galatians 6:3:

***“If you think you are too important to help someone in need, you are only fooling yourself. You are really a nobody.” – Galatians 6:3***

Jesus said that when we do an act of service for the least person, we are serving Him. We should be willing to serve anyone.

The final guiding principle we should follow is to be willing to serve without recognition. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that we shouldn’t be doing our acts of righteousness to be noticed by others. Jesus said that we shouldn’t be worried about recognition. God sees what we are doing and He will reward us.

When I think about this ideal of serving without recognition, serving anonymously, I think of this poem, entitled ***I Wonder***, written by Ruth Harms Calkin:

**You know, Lord, how I serve You  
With great emotional fervor  
In the limelight  
You know how eagerly I speak for You**

**At a women's club  
You know how I effervesce when I promote a fellowship group  
You know my genuine enthusiasm at a Bible Study**

**But how would I react, I wonder  
If you pointed to a basin of water  
And asked me to wash the calloused feet  
Of a bent and wrinkled old woman  
Day after Day; Month after month  
In a room where nobody saw and nobody knew**

Let those final words sink in for a moment- ***nobody saw and nobody knew.*** The real test of whether or not we have a servant's heart is would we be willing to do what we do for the Lord if nobody would ever know about it and if we would never receive any recognition for it.

If we are serving for the recognition we can receive, then our serving is self-serving. Then our act of service is not an act of greatness. It is an act of greed. We have become greedy for recognition.

A true servant of God doesn't have to be in the limelight. He/she is content to remain in the background. They don't have to be thanked. They don't have to be recognized.

The only recognition that matters is the *atta boy/ atta girl* the Lord is going to give us when we get to heaven and we hear- "well done, good and faithful servant."

**Toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein removed the portraits of two scientists- Newton and Maxwell from his wall. He replaced those with portraits of Gandhi and Schweitzer. Einstein explained that it was time to replace the image of success with the image of service.**

It is time to be more concerned with service than with success. According to the ***Upside Down Way of Jesus***, last is first and greatness is measured by our service to others.

When Jesus came to earth, He didn't climb the ladder of success. He came down to serve. Look again at how Jesus described Himself and His mission on earth:

***“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.” – Mark 10:45***

Jesus served us by dying on the cross for our sins. This morning you can receive salvation by accepting Jesus as your Savior, by confessing your faith, by repenting of your sins, by being baptized into Christ.

If you are already a Christian and would like to come serve the Lord with us, you can receive church membership by your profession of faith in Christ.