

## Sunday Lesson – October 17, 2021

### GOSPEL: Mark 10: 35-45

*“The Highest Places of Honor”*



#### Context

“This passage plays a key role in the Gospel according to Mark’s understanding of why Jesus dies and what his death means. It describes the Christian gospel and the community it creates as utterly different from the “business as usual” we encounter all around us. At the same time, Jesus’ words in 10:45 are often misconstrued and made to support theological proposals that are foreign to Mark’s Gospel. Preachers therefore find themselves given a choice opportunity to get to the heart of the matter of Jesus’ death and what it means for our discipleship.

In the preceding scene (10:32-34), Jesus gives his final and most detailed prediction of his trial, suffering, death, and resurrection (compare the less formal references to death yet to come in 14:8, 17-28). He is about to enter Jerusalem (11:1-11) and confront the temple-based aristocracy.” *(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-2/commentary-on-mark-1035-45-2)*

#### Insight

“Now Jesus predicts his death a third time, saying, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn him to death, and will deliver him to the Gentiles. They will mock him, spit on him, scourge him, and kill him. On the third day he will rise again” (Mark 10:33-34). Completely ignoring what Jesus has said, James and John ask Jesus for preferred seating “in your glory” (10:37). Jesus then tells the disciples, “Whoever of you wants to become first among you, shall be bondservant of

all” (10:44)—and then Jesus holds up his own sacrificial service as a model for all disciples (10:45).

However, the disciples consistently fail to comprehend either the passion predictions or Jesus’ instruction on discipleship following each prediction. Jesus is so different from the expected messiah that they just don’t “get it.” It is as if their spiritual eyes have been focused in one place so long that, now that the messiah appears in their midst, they cannot refocus their eyes to see him clearly.

Following this story of James and John, Jesus will heal another blind man, who “regained his sight and followed him on the way” (10:46-52). The stories of blind men who regain their vision serve as bookends around the stories of the disciples who cannot see. While all twelve disciples fail to see, Mark singles out Peter, James, and John, the inner circle, for special notice.”

*(Excerpts from sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary-old/mark-1035-45/)*

#### Gospel Reading

“James and John, Zebedee’s sons, came up to him. “Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us.” “What is it? I’ll see what I can do.” “Arrange it,” they said, “so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory—one of us at your right, the other at your left.” Jesus said, “You have no idea what you’re asking. Are you capable of drinking the cup I drink, of being baptized in the baptism I’m about to be plunged into?” “Sure,” they said. “Why not?” Jesus said, “Come to think of it, you *will* drink the cup I drink, and be baptized in my baptism. But as to awarding places of honor, that’s not my business. There are other arrangements for that.” When the other ten heard of this conversation, they lost their tempers with James and John. Jesus got them together to settle things down. “You’ve observed how godless rulers throw their weight around,” he said, “and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It’s not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first

among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.” The Message

### **What It Could Mean?**

“The narrative follows a simple pattern: the sons of the Zebedee pose a question to the teacher, inaugurating a dialogue where Jesus gives a response. The dialogue progresses from a simple question about a literal sitting at the table to broader criteria about community ruling. Without claiming literary dependence, Mark uses here a Johannine technique whereby the punchline relies on a misunderstanding between a literal dimension (sit at the table) and a theological one (sit next to Christ).

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, request of Jesus to be seated next to him “in glory.” Jesus’ response brings to the fore the main topic that weaves together the whole gospel of Mark. Scholars have long considered Mark “the gospel of the cross” because other main topics such as the temple, discipleship, and Christology resort back to the reality of the cross as the grounding criteria of interpretation. Although Mark features the apostles as the main models of discipleship, the gospel also presents them as flawed characters. Think, for example, of Peter, who continuously misunderstands Jesus’ messianism. At the peak of the Gospel, Mark is explicit about Peter failing to follow his teacher to the cross. In the end, Jesus stands by himself, abandoned by the most prominent apostle and the rest of the disciples.

In this passage, we encounter a theologized version of the “cross” as the criteria for following Jesus. To the disciples’ request, Jesus responds: “are you able to take my cup? Or to undergo the baptism which I am to undergo?” The disciples’ response is bold, and Jesus does not disavow it. Instead, Jesus resorts to a principle of undecidability about who may occupy

the authority’s chair: “it is not for me to give but to those for whom it has been made ready” (10:40). This is an enigmatic saying that has been traditionally interpreted as Jesus conferring authority to God. I would like to suggest a supplementary reading.

The undecidability of who will have a front seat on the other side of such experiences comes from the fact that it ultimately depends on the Father and from the fact that pain is a liminal experience in itself. Victims of torture express that they cannot think of a future beyond the fact that pain destroys their bodies and language. Accordingly, we can interpret Jesus’ words as a raw acknowledgment of such reality: we only know that true discipleship involves following in the steps of Jesus’ crucifixion, but very much like Mark’s original ending insinuates silence (Mark 16:8), so the reality of following in the steps of the cross ends with any expectation of what the future world holds.”  
*(Excerpts from workingpreacher.org; Revised Common Lectionary by Luis Menéndez-Antuña)*

### **Readings for Further Study**

- [Mark 9:35/1 Peter 4:10/John 15: 12-13/Matthew 20:26/28: 18-20](#) *Jesus Christ’s lordship will be expressed in our love for others*
- [2 Corinthians 4:5/Colossians 3: 23-24](#) *Serving others is serving Christ*
- [Philippians 2: 6-7](#) *True leadership is servanthood*

### **Thought for the Day**

“It is impossible to serve God without serving one another.”  
~ *Alistair Begg*

### **A Prayer**

“O, Heavenly Father, give me a heart like the heart of Jesus, a heart more ready to serve than be served, a heart moved by compassion towards the weak and oppressed, a heart set upon the coming of your kingdom in the world of men and women.”  
**Amen.** ~*John Baillie*