

## The Way Up Is Down

### Mark 10:31-45

About 70 years ago, Emile Rieu (<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/A8uV0YQCYAA0sPY.jpg:large>), a world-renowned publisher/editor of the Penguin Classics and translator of works like Homer's *Odyssey* was asked to do a fresh translation of the four Gospels of the New Testament. Rieu was also an outspoken agnostic. When Rieu's son Dominic, also a well-known classicist and language scholar, heard of this, he said, "It will be interesting to see what my agnostic father will make of the four gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the four gospels will make of my father." Dominic did not have to wonder too long. Within a year of beginning his translation, at the age of nearly 70, Dr. Emile Rieu became a committed follower of Jesus. And, the passage we come to today was central to his conversion.

I've thought of that story this week as I've prepared this sermon. I rarely go away from reading the four Gospels being the same person I was when I began. And, that is certainly true of the passage we come to today. It has been the main text that has shaped my understanding of how God would have me conduct myself as your pastor. And, I've found that this week, yet again, God has spoken to me through it in a new way at this point in my life. I pray the same will happen to you.

I think the best way to enter into the topic today is by looking at the request – or some may call it the demand -- that the brothers James and John brought to Jesus in **Mk 10:35** -- "**Teacher,**" they said, "**we want you to do for us whatever we ask.**"

Have you ever prayed a prayer like that? I must confess that I have. Indeed, I think too many of my prayers are like that. And, often, when I look back on those kinds of prayers, I realize that the Lord was saying, as Jesus said to James and John **v. 38**, "**You don't know what you are asking!**" In fact, as I look back on those kinds of prayers I've prayed, I've sensed God saying to me, "Greg if you had known what you were asking, you wouldn't have wanted me to answer yes to what you were asking of me." And, I humbly have to say, "I see it now, Lord – but I didn't see it when I prayed it." Has that ever been true of you?

Let's see what has led up to these brothers, these sons of Zebedee, making this request of Jesus.

### **The Story:** *The Paradoxical Topography of the Kingdom of God (or, the Upside-Down Kingdom)*

In Mk10:32-34, for the third time in his journey toward Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus took his disciples aside to tell them specifically about his impending death.

**Declaration #1 -- 8:31-32** -- Jesus said he would be killed and then rise again. Peter rebuked him.

**Declaration #2 -- 9:32-34** – Jesus said he would be killed and then rise again. The disciples argued about which of them would be the greatest.

With those in mind, look at the 3rd time Jesus told the disciples what would happen in Jerusalem. It's found in **10:32-34**. *Again, Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."*

Notice the very next verse, **Mk 10:35**: **Then, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."**

I imagine Jesus may have been a bit exasperated when he asked in **v. 36**, "**What do you want me to do for you?**" And, they answer in **v. 37**, "**Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.**"

I know their words seem, on first glance, to be rather insensitive and callous. It feels like the brothers are saying, "Jesus, you say you're going to die in Jerusalem, but we don't think you really will – so we want to ensure that we have the most prestigious positions when we all get to Jerusalem next week." But, I don't think that's exactly what they were saying when they made this request.

Two things might help you read this passage a bit differently. First, these two brothers, James and John, were by nature fighters. They were strong and confident. When Jesus chose them to be disciples in **Mk 3:17**, he nicknamed them "Sons of Thunder" ("Boanerges" in Greek). So, he knew what they were like. And, Jesus wanted them with him. In one vivid incident on their journey, we see their thunder-like qualities come out. Jesus and His disciples were traveling through Samaria and they ran into trouble with the locals

there. When Jesus looked for accommodations, the Samaritans turned him down. In **Lk 9:24**, we read, *When James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”*

With that in mind, the second thing I want you to know is that, when the brothers asked to sit on Jesus’s right and left, they were not only asking him for the places of greatest prestige such as sitting at the right and left of the host of a meal. No, those on the right and left of a person in the midst of a battle were those who were committed to providing security for their leader.

Putting those two things together, look at the text again. The brothers say, “Jesus, we’re sorry you’re so obsessed with the opposition in Jerusalem and think you’re going to have to die there. So, we want you to know that we’ll keep that from happening. Let us be at your right and left and you’ll be OK! It makes no sense for you to die. So, we have a better plan. Jesus, just do what we ask, and we’ll be there for you!”

So, Jesus says, “You don’t even know what you’re asking.” And they didn’t. They didn’t know what their real need was in this world, i.e., they most needed a way for their sins to be atoned for. And, because they couldn’t see that, they also couldn’t see the real reason for Jesus’s coming into this world, one that would require his death. They did not yet have eyes to see or ears to hear what Jesus was saying to them.

In that light, Jesus asked, *“Can you drink the cup I’ll drink and be baptized with what I’ll be baptized with?”* In other words, “Can you be immersed in the kind of suffering and death that I soon will endure to accomplish my Father’s work in this world?” They said immediately and with confidence, *“We can!”* In other words, “Jesus, those other 10 disciples may be wimpy but, you know us – we’re the Sons of Thunder! We’ll protect you! So, Jesus, stop talking about dying and do what we ask you to do!”

Jesus knew that the battle he would face was much bigger than just against those who would oppose him in Jerusalem. He had come to do battle against the kingdoms of this world, the kingdom of the Evil One and against the kingdom of sin that ravages human hearts. So, Jesus tells James and John in **v. 40** that the places nearest to him had long been appointed by his Father, the One who is at work in all things to bring about good. It’s a bit ironic that these two brothers would indeed be playing central roles in the establishment of God’s kingdom – after Jesus’s death and resurrection. James and John would see better than they were seeing when they demanded those positions as they did. And James and John did drink the cup Jesus drank for the cause the Gospel. These brothers would die in the battle – but only physically die.

Then, in **10:41**, the other 10 disciples heard the conversation and became indignant. You know why, don’t you? James and John had gotten to Jesus first with their request. They had done all the things that leadership books tell us to do – asserted themselves, taken the initiative to provide a better plan for the team. And, of course, that meant that positions 1 & 2 in the Jesus’s administration were now taken. The best available positions to the other disciples were numbers 3-12. The other disciples were angry that, because of James and John getting to Jesus first, they could only get director-level roles instead of vice-presidencies!! Come on, LAC folks – Isn’t this how the world thinks?”

To this, we read what I call “the hammer blow of Mark’s Gospel”. Jesus, for the first time, declares specifically **why** he will die. He let them and us know how the greatest accomplishment in the history of the world would be brought about. Listen anew to Jesus’ words in **10:42-45**:

*Jesus said, “You know that those regarded as rulers in the world lord it over their people, and their high officials exercise power over them for their own benefit. Not so with you! Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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.”*

Jesus not only taught this, but he lived it out. So, in Mk 10:46-52, Jesus healed another man viewed as the “least of these”, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Then, he went directly into Jerusalem where he would die as a ransom for these disciples -- and for us. That’s the story, life through death. Greatness through service. The way up is down.

### **What Does This Say to Us: It Is a Call to a New Way of Living**

As I said earlier, this is the passage that God has used to be the foundation of every role and place to which God has called me -- whether as husband and father, school president, your pastor, etc. If I can

communicate the reason for this simply and clearly, I think it will become the same for you. Let me try to speak of this by using those three words we've used throughout this series: see, understand and respond:

**See – God has a plan that he is accomplishing in this world than we often cannot see.** *Jesus said, “You don't know what you are asking (10:38)?*

I find it so easy to criticize James and John. Don't you? They seem so dense and stubborn. But, the more I think about them, the more I see myself in them. They knew things in their world were messed up. They knew that the oppression they felt from being under a godless government was not right. They knew their own people's disinterest in or apathy about the things of God was not right. They had no way to grasp how Jesus dying could change any of that. They had seen his extraordinary miracles over and over. He's the only one they knew who might make things better. He could maybe be as great as Moses and Elijah were. Why would he of all people die? That's what they saw at the time.

Can you empathize with them? Do you see that the very thing that made no sense to them was the only hope they had in this world, i.e., that Jesus's death was the only hope for salvation. Are you in a situation that makes no sense to you? Do you say? “These things at work are wrong!” “These things in my marriage and family are messed up!” “This transition stuff that's happening at church doesn't make sense.”

**I remind you that, at the heart of our faith, we believe that God is present and at work in all things in our world.** To what end? Rom 8:28: “... for good, yes *“for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

So, when you cannot see well into why the things happening in the present are happening, open your eyes to the reality that God is at work in all things and your hope will be renewed.

**Understand – God does not need us to rescue him though he delights in using us to further his plan.**

*Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left... (10:37).*

Every time I read Scripture, it speaks in new ways to me. This time, I've been remembering back to times when I have prayed as James and John did, “Lord, if only you will do what I ask you to do, you'll see I'll do some great things for you.” Some of the prayers are not such bad prayers – like, “Lord, if only you will heal this cancer, you'll see how earnestly I will serve you and love people and...” When I do, I sense God saying, “Greg, serve me earnestly and love people deeply now with what health strength you have. I heal -- but you don't see yet what I'm doing through this trial in your life. Trust me.”

I'll confess to you too that sometimes I have thought, “Lord, if only you would let me be a benevolent dictator in this congregationally governed church, I could make everything right around here.” And, he says to me, “My child, do you know who is Lord of this church? Do you know who makes things right in a church? Don't look in the mirror for the answer, Greg. I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. No, I've called you and will use you – but I don't need you to rescue my church.”

Am I the only one often tempted to pray? “Lord, I want you to do whatever I ask and then see what great things I'll do for you!” Do you ever think, “Lord, let me win that billion-dollar lottery, and I'll give enough money to the church that it won't have to worry about meeting budget and sending out new missionaries.” I think God might say to you, “Be faithful in your giving when you have little -- and then you will find you will be faithful in much.”

Or, “Lord, if only you will let me have that job promotion, then you'll see that I'll treat the people under me better than my boss does now. I'll witness to Jesus to them. And, I'll spend more time with my husband and with my kids...” Do you hear God saying, “Do that now and see how I'll use you.”

Let me tell you that it's NOT wrong to ask specifically for things like healing, for God's financial provision and for him to open opportunities for you at school or at work. But, the model for our prayer should not be James and John saying, “Give us whatever we ask, and we'll do great things for you, Lord.” **Our model is Jesus who specifically asked, “Father, if it be possible, take this cup of the cross from me. But, Father – your will; not mine.”** And, that will of the Father that Jesus accepted was the means of our salvation. See – understand -- and

**Respond – God’s sends his people each day into the world to serve.** *Leaders in the world use their power to lord it over their people... Not so with you! For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve* (Mk 10:42-45, Waybright Version).

These verses are worthy of many sermons, don’t you think? One point is that they tell us about how to use influence and power when God has given it to us. Power often becomes self-centered and self-consuming just as it was for possessions in the case of the rich young ruler in Mk 10:17-31. But, when a position of authority is entrusted to us, we are not to run from it, but we are to use it to serve those we influence. **Our influence and power should bring benefit not to us but to those we affect.** Who shows us what this is like? After Jesus died and rose again, the Apostle Paul said this: “*Let your attitude in life be like that of Jesus who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Instead, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant* **(Phil 2:5-7)**.”

So, the thing I want to tell you today is that **the main calling in Jesus-like living is service.** We all have influence of some kind in this world. You influence your family members whether you are the parent or child. You affect your workplace whether you are the boss or the worker. You influence those around you in school whether you are the teacher or the student. **What Jesus told you to do before he died to serve you is to live each day asking how you might serve those he will bring across your path. That’s how we are to live.**

We think that the more power we have, the greater we will be. And Jesus turns that way of the world on end. He says, “Those who are willing to be the least will be the greatest.” Of course, we will not be able to do everything Jesus did when he served. We do not have the ability to give our lives to forgive the sins of the world. And, we cannot serve everyone who is in our vicinity each day. But, Jesus asks us to do what he did, i.e., to be aware of those times when God is bringing someone into our lives. Then, see them. Ask what their needs might be. And, seek to serve them with what wisdom and resources you may have.

It’s a new way of life: **Daily, Jesus calls us to use our words and our actions to serve those around us.** Pray that you might see the one whom God brings across your path as a divine appointment. Then, **use whatever God gives you to seek justice where there is injustice, to show mercy when no one else shows mercy and to walk humbly with God when everyone is living for himself.**

I have more I want to say – but I will stop with this. Please, think about it: Just before going to Jerusalem to die, Jesus said that he had come to serve us – to serve us by giving his life to ransom ours, to free us from our sin, shame and guilt. He came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for us. And he calls you and me to do the same. “*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.*”

Jesus turns our world’s values and ways upside down. In the eyes of our Lord Jesus Christ, the way up is down. Life like that will be – to God’s glory alone.