

## Leadership

Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

**Question:** How can I achieve greatness?

**Key Passages:** Ephesians 5:21, Luke 12:37; John 13:14

### The Request of James and John (Mark 10:32–40)

As Jesus pushes toward Jerusalem, the capital city (v. 32), he predicts his execution a third time. The political overtones are hard to mute with the mention of the Chief Priests, the Scribes, and Roman soldiers. These “signs of the times” were obviously not lost on the disciples, who expected an earthly kingdom to be inaugurated immediately. Such a kingdom would necessitate cabinet members surrounding the king. Jesus already promised the Twelve thrones to sit on (Matt 19:28, cf. Luke 22:30). That only fanned into flame an already smoldering competition among them. Each of them coveted a special appointment. James and John set their sights on the highest honors at Jesus right and left as chief-advisors.

James and John want Jesus to grant “whatever they ask” (Mark 10:35). King Herod earlier used these same words to make an offer to his salacious step-daughter: “Ask me for whatever you wish,” Herod said, “and I will give it to you” (Mark 6:22). As you might recall, the foolish offer cost Herod dearly. He found himself beheading a prophet. Jesus is a different kind of king than Herod and would never submit to such an ill-advised request.

James and John sought premier appointments. In an honor/shame culture these positions of power would be coveted especially for the enormous advantages they could offer to one’s friends and family. Salome, their mother, was well aware of this. She becomes complicit in the plot. Because Jesus has already given James and John special privileges, they do have reason to think he might just grant their request. They have to act quickly, however, lest Peter weasel his way ahead of James. After all, Peter was privy to the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:37/Luke 8:51), the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2/Matt 17:1/Luke 9:28), and Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:33/Matt 26:37). There were others who might make a run for power as well, such as Iscariot, the group’s treasurer.

Jesus did have his inner-circle. In such an environment, and at this particular time as they approached the capital city, there were appointments of status to be had by those who could position themselves to be chosen. The entire political history at the disciples’ disposal would encourage such seeking of rank. From Augustus to Alexander, from the Maccabees to David’s “mighty men”, from Gibraltar to the Ganges, this was the *modus operandi* of political progress.

Jesus never promised to grant their request. He told them it was God’s decision who would be promoted to the right and left hand. Instead, Jesus asks if they are willing to suffer.

The synonymous metaphors of cup and baptism both foreshadow suffering. The “cup” was usually a metaphor for God’s judgment (see Jer 25:15–29; Zech 12:2). Likewise, baptism was a metaphor for being drowned in sorrow or suffering: “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” (Luke 12:50; cf. Psa 69:2–3).

They think Jesus is talking about “Paying the cost to be the boss.” After all, many regime changes require great sacrifice, even loss of life. This appears to be how James and John interpret Jesus’ words. What follows, however, clarifies that Jesus has something different in mind. Suffering is not the price one pays on the way to achieving positions of power. *Rather suffering, particularly through service, is the vocation of all leaders in the kingdom.*

### **Greatness in the Kingdom, vv. 41–44**

The request of James and John infuriates the other Apostles, not because it was inappropriate, but because they were envious. They too coveted those seats. Jesus was also scandalized by their request but for a different reason. His reply is telling. Our translations suggest that the rulers are recognized as rulers by those they rule: “those who are regarded as rulers” (NIV). The original Greek seems to suggest a different meaning: “those who give the impression [or have the reputation] of ruling.” Those who give the impression are the rulers not the ruled. *Thus, Jesus’ phrase implies they considered themselves rulers and seek popular acclaim to substantiate their claim.* Doesn’t that sound more realistic? Rulers try to jockey for position and popular acclaim. They try to “look presidential” or impress people with their power. These self-promoting leaders *give the impression* they are ruling sovereignly even though Jesus taught that God alone was the true ruler. Jesus, of course, has been described as a ruler in Mark. Yet here is what’s important (and a clear model for any of us who claim to be rulers): Each time Jesus exercises his authority, it is for the benefit of the lowly, either teaching the crowds, healings, or exorcisms (Mark 1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7).

Jesus identified these leaders as “rulers of the Gentiles.” In Mark’s book there are two who fit this profile—Herod and Pilate. Mark labels Herod a king when, in fact, he was not. Herod did pursue the title, at the instigation of his wife, Herodias. However, instead of a crown he was exiled by the Emperor in 39 AD because of his ambitions. In the gospel, Herod, against his better judgment, beheads John the Baptist, through the conniving of his wife and the entrapment of his pubescent stepdaughter. He was ruled by a couple of “powerless women” in his own household. They forced him to do what he never would have willingly done had he not been addicted to the perception of power.

As for Pilate, he crucified Jesus against his better judgement. He capitulated to the crowds when they threatened him with blackmail. They suggested he would be no friend of Caesar if he didn’t kill Jesus. Neither Herod nor Pilate had control even though they had power. They both capitulated to their subordinates for fear they would lose their coveting title. Here’s the rule: “Those who present themselves as rules are ruled by their desire to be seen as rulers.”

What proved true within the realm of Mark's literary world was just as true in the real world of Roman politics. This was, in fact, how politics operated even and especially up to the Emperor. One coin from Tiberius' day depicted him as the semi-divine son of Augustus. A second showed the head of Tiberias with this inscription, "He who deserves adoration." While Tiberias was, in many ways, an especially egregious example of a self-promoting leader, no emperor from Julius to Hadrian could escape the accusation. There is hardly a fraction of difference between Tiberius and the political rulers on offer in our own day. Technology has changed but political psychology hasn't budged an inch. Those who desire to be seen as rulers are ruled by their desire.

Jesus is so different than every other politician. He says kingdom rulers would lead through service. Whoever wishes to be great must become a servant and those who desire to be first must be a slave. If we want greatness in Jesus' realm it will be by serving more broadly, not acquiring higher status in seats of honor.

### **Jesus' Ultimate Advice on Leadership, v. 45**

Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This is, perhaps, the most important thing Jesus ever said. It is certainly the most important leadership lesson he ever gave. It is the clearest statement in the Gospels concerning the meaning of Jesus' death. So naturally, we see Jesus in Mark 10:45. He is the Lord who died for the sins of the world. This is right and true. However, if we divorce Mark 10:45 from the previous political discussion it has two devastating effects. First, detaching Mark 10:45 from its context inappropriately differentiates Jesus' cross from the disciple's. In other words, sacrificial death is seen as something Jesus does on our behalf rather than a political practice to which the disciple is called. The point of this passage, however, is that James and John must imitate Jesus' political practice of servanthood. *Thus, the cross of Jesus is not merely a gift to be appropriated; it is a "vocation" to be imitated.*

Second, and more importantly, divorcing Mark 10:45 from its context renders Jesus' saying an ethereal religious principle rather than a descriptive public program. In short, Jesus' death is often viewed as paying the spiritual price for personal sins rather than being a national ransom for Israel. This is not to deny the priceless, substitutionary, and atoning nature of Jesus' death. It is to affirm, however, that the cross of Jesus is central to his political agenda—the (re)establishment of God's kingdom. It is also to affirm our own role in imitating his practice not just believing his teaching. Jesus saw his death as the means by which Israel would be liberated from the consequences of her sins to establish his kingdom. Our role is to do the same thing in our own culture and time to bring the salvation of Jesus to people we in our ambit and influence.

Perhaps nowhere is this seen more clearly or misunderstood more woefully than Ephesians 5:21, "Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." Paul is as clear as he

can be that those who imitate Jesus live in submission to those they serve. All of us are to submit to one another as servants. The next sentence, however, states that wives are to be in submission to their husbands. That verse has triggered an avalanche of politically correct explanations as if women are somehow placed in brutal bondage by the expectation of submission. Yet how is that different for any of us? If we follow Jesus, leadership means self-abnegation. This is not humiliation but exaltation in imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This whole theology of humility is nothing new for Jesus. A year before Mark 10:45 he told an unlikely parable in Luke 12 about a Master who went away to fetch his bride. When he returned his servants had better be ready and waiting. Why? The story didn't end like anyone expected. Here is Jesus' own words, "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and *he will come and serve them,*" (Luke 12:37). Never did this ever happen. No king, no governor, no leaders ever served his servants, especially not at his own wedding...until Jesus. The night before he died, he actually and literally washed the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). He concluded with these famous words, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet," (John 13:14).

**Key Points:**

- Those who present themselves as rules are ruled by their desire to be seen as rulers.
- The cross is not merely what Jesus did for us but an example of how we should live for others.
- Mutual submission to service is a universal expectation Jesus modeled in foot-washing.

**Action Step:** Go out of your way this week to serve one person in a way they could never expect or demand.

**Further Resources:** John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (1972).