

Ruling the kingdom and being like a slave

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[0 : 00] The reading today is from Mark chapter 10, verse 32 to 52, which is at page 1020. It's Mark chapter 10, verse 32.

And they were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles.

And they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise. And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.

And he said to them, What do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.

Jesus said to them, You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? And they said to him, We are able.

[1 : 16] And Jesus said to them, The cup that I drink, you will drink. And with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized. But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.

And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.

And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.

[2 : 27] But he cried out all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stopped and said, Call him. And they called the blind man, saying to him, Take heart, get up, he is calling you.

And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, What do you want me to do for you? And the blind man said to him, Rabbi, let me recover my sight.

And Jesus said to him, Go your way, your faith has made you well. And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Great. Thank you very much.

do keep that passage open, March 10. And what we find in the beginning of this account with James and John is that they get to hear a sentence from Jesus, which is the sentence that we'd all absolutely love to hear. Have a look down at verse 36. Jesus says to them, what do you want me to do for you? Awesome. In fact, Bartimaeus, in the very next account, in verse 46 onwards, in verse 51, gets the same lucky question. Verse 51, what do you want me to do for you? Now, if you could ask, if that was Jesus right now in the city, what do you want me to do for you? What would you ask for? I mean, he's God. It could be absolutely anything you want. What would you like me to do for you? What would you say to him? Now, some people might think that's a vulgar question. You know, you shouldn't sort of say, God, I want you to do this and that for me as if he's some sort of sugar daddy God. And there's truth in that. But at the same time, he's our loving father who loves to give us good gifts. So if you could ask for a good gift, what would it be? Now, when you do this in an introduction, I know how this works in talks. If you do this in an introduction, there's a bit of a text, isn't it, really? And in a sense, it is. Maybe realise that. Because somehow there are certain things you ought not to ask for. We instinctively know that about prayer, don't we? And there are other things that are good things to ask for. So in your mind, when I ask you that question, what would you ask Jesus for? Maybe you rectified it in your mind and thought, these are the kind of things I ought to ask for. And somehow, the thing that we ask for might well exhibit or say something about the state of our hearts, doesn't it? I mean, what is the thing you'd ask for? And what did it say about me? Well, in the example we're looking at today, we're going to compare James and John and Bartimaeus and see what they asked for and why they asked for it. Because it says something about themselves as people. And it teaches us about what it is to be a disciple. And it's quite a surprising answer. Because the person you'd expect to be the disciple isn't the one that you'd expect to be a disciple. Well, before we actually get into the text, let me just remind you what we've been looking at over these few weeks. This is actually the last in our series of

[5 : 55] Mark chapters 8 to 10. And there have been two big metaphors that have been going on through. One is, and this is why I call it the series of this, is to follow Jesus. Follow me, he says, along the road to Jerusalem. Let me remind you of what's going on as they go to Jerusalem. Look around at verse 32. They're on the road going up to Jerusalem.

And Jesus was walking ahead of them, and they were amazed. Why are they amazed? Look what's going to happen. Those who followed him were afraid. Why are they afraid? Look what's going to happen when he gets there. Taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was going to happen to them. See, he said, see, we're going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and to the scribes. And they'll condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him. And after three days he'll rise again. The reason they're frightened, the reason they're amazed that Jesus is going to Jerusalem, is because the Jews and the Gentiles, that's everybody, are going to collaborate together to put him to death. And in a horrible, despised way, mocked at, spit at, flogged. But he will rise again after three days. So following Jesus, being a follower of Jesus, being a disciple, following him on the road to Jerusalem, is to go the way he went. Remember, take up your cross and follow me, to deny yourself. That's what it means to be a disciple.

The second metaphor is that of blind men. At the beginning of the chapters, in Mark chapter 8, there's a story where Jesus takes two turns to heal a blind man. And that blind man is a metaphor for the disciples because they begin to see who Jesus is, that he's the Messiah, the Christ. But they haven't fully seen who he is, that he's the Christ who's going to come to die. And that to follow him means to die myself, to go the way of suffering, to give up myself, to serve others. So they're partially blind, but partially sighted, you see. And we're going to see today is that we're going to get another account of a blind man at the end of these chapters, Barthamite, who does see fully, who's the model disciple. So seeing and following are the same metaphor. It's seeing, what it means to be a disciple is to follow him along the road of suffering and hardship and denying myself and serving others. And that's what it means to be great in the kingdom of God. And that's exactly what we get summarised in this James and John incident. And that's the first point on your sheet. You should have on the back of your sheet some points. And the first point is this. Life in the kingdom of God is suffering now, but glory later. Let's see how that works out with James and

John. So I'm going to read from verse 35. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus and said to him, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. It's a pretty bold thing to start off with. And he said to them, well, what do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left hand in glory.

Jesus said to them, you don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised? And they said to him, we're able. And Jesus said to them, the cup that I drink, you will drink. And with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised. But to sit at my right hand on my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it's been prepared.

[9 : 25] So James and John are the two of the three closest disciples following Jesus. And they come up to him and very boldly and possibly a bit arrogantly say, we want you to do whatever we ask. But I guess that's what we do every time we pray. So in a sense, that's not that arrogant a thing to do because we should ask Jesus for great things and he loves to give them to us. However, the request they want actually is the outrageous bit. Can we sit at your right and left hand in glory? Jesus, when you are the king of the universe, can me and John, can we be number one and number two? Can we be your big guys in your cabinet?

Can we be the home secretary and the foreign secretary or whatever? The greatest, I don't know whether we go to his cabinet and post office. Can we be your Karen Brady and your Nick Hewer with your Lord Sugar? Can we be your right hand and left hand man and woman, as it were? See, for them, the kingdom of God is a ticket for their own personal greatness and glory. Now when Jesus is most glorious, actually it's when he's raised up on a cross.

And ironically there will be someone on his right and someone on his left. But the glory that Jesus speaks of is not the glory they think of. His glory is to serve, not to be great. And that's how he uses this funny illustration. Did you notice he said in verse 38, are you able to drink the cup I drink or be baptised with a baptism I'm baptised with? Now he's using a clever metaphor there of these two things, a cup and baptism, because they can mean two different things, you see. To drink the cup that I drink, they're thinking, James and John are thinking, ah, the cup of kings, the big shiny silver cup with the finest wine that only the king gets to drink and will get to drink from that cup too, when we'll be great. But Jesus is actually saying, now the metaphor of drinking a cup comes from the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah, where God gives the cup of his anger to drink, actually. And so it's a metaphor for suffering. They think I drink in glory. He's saying, no, you're going to drink suffering before you have glory. Well, there is the idea of baptism, you see. Baptism, you know, you sprinkle some water on someone, it's a bit like a coronation. It's a bit like when you kneel down and someone dubs, you know, the queen dubs the sword on either shoulder, arise, whatever your name is, you see. It's a bit like that, baptism. It's a kind of a coronation, if you like. But the word baptism actually means, it's like a tsunami. It's like an overflow, it's like a flood. And perhaps you've known times in your life where you describe great hardship and suffering like a flood, like being overwhelmed. And that's what he is saying being a disciple is a bit like. It's drinking the cup of suffering. It's being baptized with being overwhelmed to the point of death. See, they think, yeah, we're up for that, because that sounds like glory. But Jesus is saying, no, you don't understand. And they don't get it, because they're still partially blind. In fact, they will drink that cup and they will be baptized without baptism. In fact, both of them suffered greatly. James was martyred, and John lived a long life of great suffering with imprisonment and exile. Now, we're often more like the James and John before they saw things clearly, I think. Sometimes, we're people who think that the kingdom of God is more about comfort than hardship. We were chatting about this as leaders in our meeting this week, the growth group leaders. We were talking about how often in prayer requests after our Bible studies, what do we ask God for? Do we ask

Jesus for? They're often prayers of comfort, aren't they? Lord, make my life a little bit better. Deal with my stress at work, or help my children to behave. We often think the kingdom of God should be about comfort, when actually Jesus says, no, the kingdom of God will be about hardship. It's suffering now and glory later very often. If we struggle in our faith, if we have times of doubt in our faith, it's often because God is not giving us what our hearts desire. My little boy, Sam, screams his head off if I'm not sitting him at exactly the right angle, so he can see exactly that patch of dull wallpaper, because that's what he wants at that moment. And so often in life, when we want it to go the way we want it to go, and we blame God, or feel far from him, or can't pray, if our life isn't going exactly the way our hearts want them to go. Because in our heart of hearts, we think life in the kingdom of God should be about our comfort, about having things just the way we want them.

Now as Christians, we're not masochists, okay? It's not that we enjoy inflicting suffering upon ourselves, or flagellate ourselves, and that's a good thing. But we do accept suffering.

[14 : 25] In fact, not only accept suffering, but the Bible encourages us to rejoice when things are hard. We see the good it does us. But we also, we're looking forward to the future glory. It's not glory and comfort now, it's glory and comfort then, and often hardship here and now.

In April, there's a, I was reading, I get a Barnabas Fund email, which is about persecution around the world. And there was a story of a man in Nigeria who was a pastor of a church, and in northern Nigeria there's been a lot of violence recently, because they've just recently elected a Christian president, when it should have been a Muslim president, it should have been the turn of a Muslim, and it wasn't, it was a Christian man. And so there are many Christians being attacked and hurt in the northern part of Nigeria where there were many Muslims.

And this man who's a pastor with a wife and eight children was in a van, they're driving in the countryside, and some police stopped them. It turned out these policemen weren't really policemen, they were just some Muslim men dressed as policemen. And they said to the people in the van, is anyone in this van a Christian? Now, the wise person, given the situation in Nigeria at that point, keeps his mouth shut. But this pastor said, no, I'm a Christian. And so they pulled him out of the van, and they tried to get him to renounce his faith in Jesus, and they tortured him, and they gouged his eyes out, and they killed him. This is just a couple of months ago. Now, what strikes me as an example of that, because that's not going to happen on the M1, or it's not going to happen on the Croxtail Road, that. But here's a man who had every reason to keep his mouth shut, because it would have seemed a wise thing to do. He'd think, for the sake of my wife, for the sake of my kids, for the sake of my church, knowing what's going on in that region, it would seem wise to keep your mouth shut. But here was a man who knew that life in the kingdom of God is not about my comfort, but about honouring Jesus, and it might well involve suffering.

For him, it might well involve death. He was not blind, you see. He knew that life is about suffering now and glory later, not comfort and glory and grab it at all costs here and now. And so we want to honour men like him, men like Jesus, men like James and John in the end, men like the disciples, who didn't live for comfort and glory now, and therefore would deny Jesus, or look to find as much comfort they can and distance themselves from him. But to live knowing that that's what life in the kingdom of God is like, suffering now and glory later. Let us be a people, brothers and sisters, and I say this to myself very humbly, who live as if glory is not something that we own as a right, which is what our culture thinks. Honour, comfort. But people who willingly and humbly accept and praise God for hardship when it happens. And let us be a people who, like James and John say in Acts 4, they rejoice that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. Our children are honoured when they are told off by teachers for talking about Jesus too much. We are honoured when we follow him whatever it costs us. That's the first point. James and John needed to learn, they were blind at this stage and they did learn, that suffering now and glory later is what the kingdom of God is about. But secondly also, greatness in the kingdom of God is about slavery now and glory at later. Have a look down at verse 41. Now when the other ten heard, they began to get indignant with James and John. In other words, they're no better than James and

John. They'd rather be his right and left hand in glory. Thank you very much, you see. Verse 42. You know that those who are, Jesus says to them, you know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles, lordy over them. And their great ones exercise authority over them.

[18:22] In other words, people in our culture, leaders in our culture, want to be leaders because they want power. They want authority. They want greatness. Verse 43. It shall not be so among you.

Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant. And whoever will be first among you must be slave of all. Now what is it in our culture that we want power and authority?

See very much the message of our culture is be a winner. Be number one. Poor old Andy Murray once again this week lost in the semi-final. Did you see his face after he'd lost? He looked devastated. You'd think he'd got to the semi-final of Wimbledon. He'd given pleasure to millions.

He'd seen you should be really pleased. But he looked shell-shocked. He looked devastated. Because if you're not a winner, you're a nobody. And that's the way our culture teaches us. Let me suggest two underlying reasons we all want greatness. One is influence and one is honour. Influence and honour. We all want to have influence. We want people to listen to our ideas. We want people to listen to what we say and what we think. We want influence over most people, don't we? All people. Our spouses, our children. We want our way in the office, at home, in church. We complain when things don't go the way we've done it. We criticise because we've done it differently. We get angry because we're not listened to, because people aren't hearing us, because we think we know best. Our degree of influence affects our own feeling of self-importance very often. Well, then there's honour. We all want others to think we're great. We all want others to honour us. Maybe it's in terms of looks for some of us. We're devastated if anyone said anything slightly negative about our appearance or our weight or our age. Because we want everyone to look at us and think, you look great. Or for some of us, it's about our achievements. We want others to know what we've done. Our motivation is to get great exam results or to have beautiful homes so that others think of us. Well, they've done well, haven't they? Simon was telling me this week there was apparently a survey done in the city amongst city workers where they were asked this. Would you rather, I can't remember the actual numbers, but it was something like this. Would you rather earn \$150,000 a year and all your colleagues earn \$180,000 a year? Or would you rather earn \$75,000 a year and all your colleagues \$50,000? Now, what would you say? It's interesting. Apparently, the majority went for the latter. See, it's not about the money itself. It's about being just that bit better than everyone else. Or for others, it's about rank. My job, title, or my pay scale, if you like, is what gives me my identity and my personal sense of worth. See, when someone says to me, what do you do? Do you feel a real little bit of sense of pride because that's what you do? It's that kind of job. Or if I were offered a promotion tomorrow, because of the honour it is, because of what it says about me, of course I'll say yes without even thinking about the impact it might have on my family or my church or any other number of things, so often we just say yes because of the honour it is for us of getting promoted.

Or conversely, if I were made redundant, would I be devastated because of what others would think about who I am now? Be it the desire for influence and self-importance or honour and what others think of me, we all want to be first in the here and now. But that's not the way of the kingdom of God and that's not the way of Jesus. Verse 45, have a look at this very important verse. Verse 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. Jesus didn't come for honour, he came to serve.

[22 : 24] That word ransom is used in the slave market. You would pay a price to ransom or set a slave free. You see, Jesus didn't come to be a slave owner, to be great, to have lots of people doing what he wants. He came, even though he was God, he came to die, to pay the ultimate price, to set us slaves free. He was life, it was not about greatness, even though he was great, it was about service.

If you think we're in that mark there, Mark 10, and just flick onto Philippians chapter 2. We looked at this last year, but it makes the same point. Philippians chapter 2 is on page 1180. Keep your finger in the mark, 10, will you? Page 1180. This is just, again, making the same point about Jesus' example of humility. Let me read from verse 6 on page 1180, chapter 2 of Philippians, verse 6. This is about Jesus. Jesus, verse 6, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God the thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. In other words, Jesus, who was God, didn't say God, didn't want to stay powerful, but he let go of his power to become just an ordinary person, born in a manger, in an animal's feeding trough, a carpenter.

And he was God, and he was a carpenter. Verse 8. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. See, the man who was God allowed himself to be executed in the most humiliating, degrading, painful way possible. Strung up naked with common criminals, cursed by God, despised by all the people.

See, he was the one who had more influence and honour than any of us could possibly imagine having. And yet he chose to make himself the most despised and dishonoured person in all history. And what does God think of that? Look at verse 9. Therefore God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on the name of Jesus, the name that is above every name, so that the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. You see, God has taken the one who was first and made himself last, and therefore put him first. Now if you're choosing someone to rule your kingdom, who do you want? The person who thinks they're great, or the person who serves others? That's who God wants to be great in his kingdom. The one who made himself last is the one God made first. The one who made himself the most humble is the one God exalted. The one who served is the one God made Lord. And all to the glory of God.

In our culture, who are the great people in our culture? I don't know. The business executives like Lord Sugar. You see, if they were in the kingdom of God first, they'd think they're because of their business acumen, but it's not. Or who are the most exalted beauties?

[25 : 41] Like Kate Moss. They'd think if they were great in the kingdom of God, it's because of their looks. Or for, I don't know, great sportsmen, they're lordy, aren't they? People like Wayne Rudy or Klitschko, the new heavyweight champion of the world. They'd think they'd get there if they were their great in the kingdom of God because of their talent. But God exhausts the people who give themselves for the sake of others the most. The last will come first.

Now in this church, there are lots of great servants. I've seen it every week. And I really want you to know that God honours you greatly when you serve each other, when you love each other, when you care for each other. Those are the greatest in God's kingdom. And for other of us, we've got reasons why we're too busy to be serving others. Let me exhort you all, as Jesus does, be slaves of one another. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Well, our last point is actually basically a summary of these three chapters. Bartimaeus, the model disciple. Turn back with me to Mark chapter 10, if you like, please, on page 1021. Let me read to you Bartimaeus, the model disciple, and a surprising one.

They came to Jericho, verse 46, and as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples, a great crowd, with a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.

So here's a guy who's a beggar and blind. Do you know, you must walk past beggars every day, the kind of person that no one knows the name of. But here, Jesus knows the name of you, Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. It's interesting, isn't it? The rich man, who'd be the famous one in our culture in the last chapter, who knows his name? No idea.

[27 : 35] The beggar? Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. Verse 47, and when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. He calls Jesus the son of David. That's the Messiah. The promise of the Messiah was that he'd be a son of David. So like the disciples, he recognises that Jesus is the Messiah. So he's partially unblind spiritually, if you see, just like the disciples do. But what does he ask for? He just says, have mercy on me. Now, he gets rebuked, it says there, verse 48. Many rebuked him, telling him to be silent, but he cried out all the more, son of David, have mercy on me. It's easy, I think, if you're a blind beggar, when everyone just walks past you, never talks to you, like we do all the time to beggars on the street. And someone says, oh, shut up, you're pointless. For him just to go, you're right, I'm pointless. And sometimes we're like that, we think we're pointless. But what keeps him going, what keeps him going, is Jesus, not himself. He's not thinking, yeah, I'm pointless. But Jesus is the Messiah, the merciful one. It's who Jesus is that he keeps calling out to him. So Jesus calls him. Verse 49. Jesus stopped and said, call him. And they called the blind man and said to him, take heart, get up, he's calling you. And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. The one thing that he has, the one thing in the world is his cloak.

That's quite a valuable thing in their culture, actually. Without a cloak, you freeze to death. But he just chucks it on the floor because Jesus has called him. That's much more, that's what he wants, Jesus to call him. And Jesus asked him that brilliant question in verse 51.

What do you want me to do for you? And the blind man said to him, Rabbi, let me recover my sight. Jesus said to him, go your way, your faith has made you well. And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. It's striking, isn't it? The thing that he asks for is not greatness, but just to be able to sin. It's all he wants. And when Jesus says you can go your way, go your way, you're free, go. What does he do? He follows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, the very place that the disciples are terrified to go themselves.

Bartimaeus is the model disciple. He sees Jesus is the Messiah, but he's not arrogant in this. He recognises that following Jesus on the road is a way of suffering and humility. See, he's like the child. Remember we talked about being like a child? Because he's like a blind beggar.

He's humble. He throws away his cloak, unlike the rich man of last week, who doesn't follow Jesus because he owns lots. He's able to cast aside what he has. And what he wants most of all is not glory like the disciples, but just a sin. And the proof that he is truly unblind is that he follows Jesus on that road of suffering. See, the disciples were like the first blind man. They saw that Jesus is the Messiah, but they didn't see what it meant to follow Jesus.

[31 : 02] But Bartimaeus is the fully unblinded man who did. And maybe for some of us in these sermons, I hope it is, and I think it has been for me more and more dawning on me, opening my eyes, that following Jesus is a road of hardship, self-denial, humility, and serving others.

Not glory, greatness, comfort, self-denial. How can I conclude? Well, I've said it a billion times. Being a true follower of Jesus means following him on the road to Jerusalem. It means to deny myself, to take up my cross and follow him. It means not being ashamed of Jesus in front of others, because in the future he'd be ashamed of me in the kingdom of God.

It means giving up what the world has to offer, to have all that God offers us in the future kingdom of God. It means living a life of serving others, not ruling over others, because we'll receive honour and greatness in the future in the kingdom of God. It means thinking of yourself as a slave serving others. It means thinking of yourself as a child humbly honouring others, not wanting honour for yourself. It means thinking of yourself as a grovelling beggar, wanting mercy, not thinking I'm okay. It means being like a blind man who just wants to see.

Now, by the grace of God, the disciples did eventually see. And I pray for us more and more as we live our lives and mature in the kingdom of God, that we'll come to see this more and more and more. For the Son of Man did not come to serve, but to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Let's pray, shall we?

Lord Jesus, we want to honour you very much, for you did not come to serve, but to be served, and to give yourself for our sins. And so each of us now today, whatever our job, whatever our status, however many achievements we have, however intelligent or good looking, or whatever things we have to commend ourselves, Lord Jesus, we come before you like a blind beggar, like Bartimaeus, and say, Son of David, have mercy on us. And we want to be people who follow you along the road, denying ourselves in humility, serving others, for that is greatness in your kingdom. Lord Jesus, the reason right now you have the name above every name is because you were not the one who made yourself great, but made yourself last, and so God made you great. And we pray you'd give us that same spirit, your same spirit, of serving others, making ourselves last, denying ourselves, loving others, that we might be great in your kingdom.

[34 : 01] And we pray this in your good and precious name. Amen. Amen.