

Following the Servant King

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Preacher: Rev Dave Brown

[0 : 0 0] Great. Mark chapter 10. Well, last week we reflected a little on who it is who gains entry into the kingdom of heaven.

And we saw it was namely the humble penitent one who recognizes their poverty and helplessness before God and so comes to Jesus for salvation.

Well, our passage today takes it one step further. What does it look like then to live as a follower of Jesus? What is it that shapes that life? Is it glory now with more glory later? Is it rest now with more rest later?

Or something else entirely where Jesus has told us, hasn't he? Verses 43 to 44. Whoever wants to become great amongst you must be your servant. Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

It's a pattern set for us as Christians to be humble servants. And although this passage has a stronger application for those who might want or wish to have positions of influence or power or authority in the church, whether they are formal, like the ones of us wearing collars, or informal, just because you've been in the church for a long time.

[1 : 1 4] Actually, what Jesus says here to his disciples has an implication for all of us if we are seeking to follow Jesus. And if you're not convinced of that, can I point you back to Philippians chapter 2, where Paul tells the whole church there that they need to look not to themselves but to others.

They need to value others more than themselves and look to the interests of others before their own. Or go back to the Sermon on the Mount. That's where we see the upside down nature of God's kingdom, isn't it?

Where the first are last. Where it's the humble who are lifted high. Where it's the poor in spirit who inherit. Where the hungry are fed. But before we look at the servant-hearted, self-denying pattern for the Christian life, we need to make sure we understand the reason why Jesus can call us to live such a life.

So for that, we need to look at verses 32 to 34 and then verse 45, all of which take us to the cross of Jesus. And we see what Jesus has already done.

The heading in your Bibles reminds us, doesn't it, that this is the third time Jesus has spoken plainly about his death to his disciples. There have been other allusions on the way, but in chapters 8 and 9, the language has been clear.

[2 : 3 2] And Jesus is clearer still here. We're 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 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. So what do we learn about Jesus' work in these verses? Well, firstly, we see that there is, Jesus has foreknowledge of what's coming.

It's clear that what happens to Jesus in Jerusalem is not a surprise to him at all. He knew what was happening when he got there. Of course he did. He is fully God.

What's more, he knew the whole of the Old Testament. He knew what the Old Testament said would happen to the Messiah when he came. He knew what he was going to have to endure. Foreknowledge. So then we have his willing obedience.

Despite knowing what was coming, Jesus did not turn away. We know there were times, particularly in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he longed that there might be another way for salvation to come to the world.

[3 : 42] But Jesus is fully committed to the cause. Do you notice in the passage here, he is leading the way to Jerusalem. It's not his disciples and friends who are saying, come on, Jesus, that's where you need to go.

He's heading in that direction. They are following him. So he is not in any sense an unwilling victim. I'm sure that's certainly linked to his love for his father and his trust in his father.

But it's also because he knows what he has come to do. He has come, thirdly, to give his life as a ransom for many. As we saw last week, the riches of the rich young man could not buy his way into heaven.

The obedience, such as it was of the rich young man, could not earn his way into heaven. And if we think we are any different, then we are badly mistaken. It's only by Jesus' death on the cross that sins can be atoned for.

The wonderful 19th century Bishop of Liverpool, J.C. Ryle, put it this way. That death was no common death, like the death of a martyr or of other holy men.

[4 : 48] It was a public payment by an almighty representative of the debts of sinful man to a holy God. It was the ransom which a divine surety undertook to provide in order to procure liberty for sinners.

Tied and bound by the chains of their sins. By that death, Jesus made a full and complete satisfaction for man's countless transgressions.

He bore our sins in his body on the tree. The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. When he died, he died for us. When he suffered, he suffered in our stead.

When he hung on the cross, he hung there as our substitute. When his blood flowed, it was the price of our souls. It is true that we are sinners, but Christ has borne our sin.

It's true that we are poor, helpless debtors, but Christ has paid our debts. It is true that we deserve to be shut up forever in the prison of hell. But thanks be to God, Christ has paid a complete ransom for us.

[5 : 55] J.C. Ryle, what a great bishop. Friends, unless we understand what Jesus has done for us, and unless we have personally accepted his death on our behalf, purchasing our redemption, none of what follows will make any sense.

It will seem crazy to give our lives, to offer up our lives in service. And yet, when we look at the cross, when we see what Jesus has done, then things change.

You see, as we look at the cross, it opens to us God's eternal kingdom. And allows us to see everything with a different perspective, with eternity in view. And it helps us to live with eternity in view, knowing that what is to come is far greater than what we have now.

It allows us, then, to take up our cross as Jesus took up his. To serve others as Jesus served us. To give and not count the cost, because we know that what is already ours in Christ is incomparably greater than any temporary glory or fame or riches or praise that this world can ever offer us.

None of that makes any sense when you take Jesus' death on the cross in our place out of the picture. But if we know what that is, and if we know that it was for us, then we know that we are called to walk as Jesus walked.

[7 : 19] So what does that look like? Well, humble service firstly comes with the territory. James and John don't get that, do they? That's why they ask that ridiculous question in verse 37.

And you've got to admire their gall by doing it. The other 10 disciples don't understand it either. They're just upset that James and John have got there before them. That was exactly what they wanted to ask for themselves.

James and John are seeking to pull a fast one, to get one step ahead of their fellow disciples. And the disciples are upset about that. Of course, they don't see that.

They're full of self-righteous anger. Sometimes it's much harder, isn't it, to see sins in ourselves that we're very happy to condemn in others. But that's what's going on here. So Jesus takes his 12 disciples aside and very patiently, very gently explains to them that humble service comes with the territory of being his follower.

And if they're going to be his disciples, then they need to learn to live as he lived and serve as he served and give themselves to others as Jesus gave himself for them.

[8 : 29] Some of the language that goes with titles that are sometimes given to clergy don't really fit well with me. I don't like the language of deacon and priest.

It all seems rather hierarchical, as if we're looking down on people with a lower position. Particularly the word priest, it makes it sound as if I'm performing a sacrifice on a Sunday morning if I'm taking communion.

And I'm certainly not doing that. Jesus has done that once and for all upon the cross. But as you become a vicar and you get ordained first as deacon and then as priest, and please God, never as bishop, it is that sense that we don't ever move past those ordination vows to be a deacon.

Deacon means to be a servant. One who cares for Christ's flock. One who tends his sheep. And let me read you some of the declarations that Alan and I and David would have taken when we were ordained as deacons.

Deacons are to proclaim the word of God in word and deed as agents of God's purposes of love. They're to serve the community in which they're set, bringing to the church the needs and hopes of all the people.

[9 : 39] They're to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and the weak, the sick and the lonely, and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world that the love of God may be made visible.

Deacons share in the pastoral ministry of the church. They are to be faithful in prayer, expectant, watchful for the signs of God's presence as he reveals his kingdom among us.

Now, there are other roles as well. Listed in those ordination vows. And I've missed those out because all these here are specific to everybody who is part of Christ's body.

Sharing the good news of Jesus is something we're all called to do. Serving the community is something we're all called to do. Living out our faith in practical ways. Working together as the body of Christ here to care for and encourage the weak, the weary, the marginalized, being faithful in prayer, expecting God to do his work through us as through his words.

Humble service is written into the contract, if you like, when we become followers of Jesus, as much for the clergy and for everyone else. And whilst there are sometimes seasons when we are too weak and weary, when we need care and support ourselves, that's fine, by the way.

[11 : 04] And when that is us, we need to be humble enough to say, I need support right now. Not to struggle on. On our own. Nevertheless, for the majority of the church family, for the majority of our lives, the life of a disciple of Jesus is a life of willing, humble service.

It's what it is. Comes with the territory. Secondly, such service will, by its nature, be costly. Don't know whether you're a fan of the Harry Potter books and films, but there's one of the books, I forget which one it is, where Hermione Granger, the over-keen book swotty student, is given a time-turner.

She wants to take more classes than is possible to fit into a 24-hour day. So she gets this little gadget so she can head off to her maths classes, come out, hide away in a corner, turn the time-turner back an hour, and then head back in the timetable and take double physics, or whatever it is.

Things that she couldn't fit into the normal time, time is stretched. It's a great idea. Sometimes I feel I could do with 27 hours in a day. Maybe you do too. But of course, it's fantasy, isn't it?

We only get the same amount of time. We can't be in two places at once. Whatever money we have, we can't spend it in two places. Whatever energies we have, we can't use beyond our capacity.

[12 : 35] So when we obey Christ's call to serve as he served, to give as he gave, to love as he loved, to spend time visiting, or our energies cleaning, or shopping, or praying, or sharing the gospel with people, we can't take back those resources, that time, that energy afterwards, and then use it somewhere else.

It's gone. Serving Christ means serving others, and serving in the church, and that by its nature will mean that there is a cost.

I spend an hour or two with someone, I can't then spend that same time doing something else. And sometimes those acts of obedient service prove very costly indeed.

I've been listening to a series of podcasts by Open Doors, a Christian charity that supports Christians in persecuted lands around the world. The current series is working through some of the most dangerous places where it's, the countries where it's most dangerous to be a Christian right now.

One of those is Nigeria, where even that act of weakly coming along to church, joining in with services of worship and prayer, can end up with you being killed.

[13 : 49] such is the danger in some parts. That's a terrible cost to pay, isn't it? Some nations, sharing your faith with a member of another faith community will get you the same kind of treatment.

And none of that makes any sense at all outside of Jesus' sacrifice. When we take away what Jesus has done for us, when we take away the glorious future he has prepared for us, none of that makes any sense.

But praise God, it does make sense. Because through Jesus we have already gained something of inestimable value that we cannot lose. What's more, everything that we do give up in the service of Christ is never really lost.

All those acts of service and love find their way into the hands of our glorious Master Potter who shapes them into something of eternal value and of far greater glory.

a life of service for the sake of Christ will by its nature be costly. In view of all that Christ has done for us, are we paying that price?

[14 : 59] Are we serving in that way? When we're following the example of Jesus we find that humble service comes with the territory, that such service will be costly. Here's the final thing, there is a reward waiting but it is in the hands of God.

There is a reward waiting, it is certain, but it is in the hands of God. One of my oldest friends once suggested to me that Christians shouldn't be serving God because of the promise of heaven but because God by his nature is worthy of our obedience and devotion whether or not eternal life is given.

And of course he's right. God is so great, so glorious that even if there was no promise of an eternal reward he would still be rightfully worthy of our full adoration, worship and obedience just by who he is.

But there is something in us as human beings that likes to be rewarded and appreciated. There is something in us that struggles to see someone else getting praise and recognition when our efforts seem to go unnoticed.

We might shrink a little bit from being brought out to the front of church and thanked with flowers and rounds of applause but sometimes when someone else gets brought up we think I wish they'd do that for me.

[16 : 20] You ever start to feel like that just a little bit? We like to be appreciated. J.C. Ryle again says this Blessed is the one who can sincerely rejoice when others are exalted though they themselves are overlooked and passed by.

Absolutely right. James and John quickly followed by the ten want to grab some recognition and positions of note for themselves. They're imagining that Jesus coming to Jerusalem will lead to a mighty earthly kingdom and so they want to be seen as the leaders they want to be lorded and honoured.

Yeah, did you notice they're very happy for Jesus to have the centre spot but they want to be right next to him basking in his glory sharing all the fame they want to be seen as known as someone who is very important.

They want to be noticed. Jesus' response to them in verses 39 and 40 points first to his own suffering the cup that he will drink the baptism by which he will be baptised and he's talking about his death on the cross there but then he points to theirs.

James would be beheaded one of the leaders of the early church. John would face a long painful exile but Jesus he also wants to point out that whatever rewards might come our way we are not to live our Christian lives seeking after the rewards.

[17 : 48] If you think of Jesus' parable in Luke 17 Jesus explains that the servant who faithfully does their master's bidding one who is faithfully acting out what the master has called them to do is the one who at the end of a life of sacrificial service can say this I'm just an unworthy servant I've only done my duty.

Elsewhere Jesus implies that a faithful servant might expect to hear their master welcoming them home with the words well done good and faithful servant and I think that's right we should long to hear that other parts of scripture suggest that there may be some kind of reward waiting for us for the things that we've done in our service to Christ but it's very clear from this passage and elsewhere in scripture that if we seek the reward rather than the pleasure and honour of the master that we are aiming for the wrong target if it's God's gifts or rewards if it's Lord it's in this world that we are ultimately seeking then it points to the fact that actually we're living for ourselves and not for God actually such self-seeking isn't too hard to spot it's rarely sacrificial it's often more focused on doing things so other people can notice them rather than seeking God's glory and pleasure and actually the person who lives like that is rarely described as humble by anyone but themselves but it is something to check in our hearts yet wonderfully incredibly in an act of immense grace our gracious

God in heaven has not just worked salvation for us but has prepared for us a place to be with him forever and what that will be like exactly what rewards may or might not be waiting for us the fact is that those rewards are in God's hands alone so if no one in this world ever sees the service that you perform or your generosity or sees your faithfulness in visiting or cleaning or gardening or whatever that's okay God sees God sees nothing escapes his gaze but I am sure of this that when we enter God's presence and we see his glory with our own eyes when we fix our eyes on the nail-pierced hands and feet of the Lord Jesus the last thing on our minds at that point will be the rewards that we think we've deserved nothing will compare with that what God has prepared for those who faithfully follow his son will be mind-boggling beyond our imagination but we need to trust him for those things

I wonder if we will do that or whether we'll try and grasp some reward for ourselves well our attitude to that reveals our hearts as surely as anything else well we started with Jesus and his work let's end there as well that wonderful old hymn when I survey the wondrous cross ends with these words were the whole realm of nature mine that were an offering far too small love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all when we gaze on the cross and the immensity of Jesus sacrifice for us giving all we have in return to him seems suddenly not nearly enough how are we going to respond to the call of Jesus to follow him I wonder with humble active costly service or something less

Jesus has set the pattern for us he's issued us the call so I'm not going to go through a long list now of jobs that need doing in and around the church ways that we might serve the passage isn't at all about making us feel guilty that we're not serving as we should it's about fixing our eyes on Jesus seeking to grasp all that he has already done for us so that when we hear his call to sacrificial service it becomes our heart's desire to willingly answer that call and to follow him and to live for him and his glory all the days of our lives may that be so in us amen amen amen holy Thank you.