

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor Emeritus  
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)  
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
Sunday, April 7, 2024

Mark 10:35-45 (read vv.32-34 also?) “Greatness in God’s Sight”

Intro. Do you have any aspirations for greatness? I imagine some of the younger folks in the audience still have aspirations of greatness, perhaps becoming a great leader of a corporation or a great political leader. There are some basketball players in the NCAA that are all working to become the greatest players and the greatest team in college basketball. Yes, human nature has a prideful desire for greatness.

This morning as we look in this text of Scripture, Jesus is going to show us how we can be great, not in *this* world, but great in the eternal kingdom of God. At this point in Mark’s Gospel, we find Jesus and His disciples drawing near to Jerusalem. They were going up for the Passover feast, where hundreds of thousands of Jewish families would offer up a lamb as a sacrifice. Yet Jesus knew that soon, He was going to offer *Himself* as a sacrificial lamb on a Roman cross. So He warns His disciples in vv.33-34 that in Jerusalem He would be condemned to death by the ruling council of Israel, and then delivered to the Romans to be severely mistreated and then executed by the terrible death of crucifixion.

Somehow, this warning did not sink into the minds of the disciples. While Jesus was thinking of dying for others, James and John were thinking of themselves. They were not thinking of a cross. They were thinking of a crown, a crown that *they* wanted. They wanted to be the greatest in the coming kingdom. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah and they hoped that He was going to Jerusalem to establish His kingdom over the whole world and they would reign with Him. Thoughts of greatness filled their minds. In fact, Jesus recently promised that they would sit on 12 thrones in His kingdom (Mt. 19:28<sup>1</sup>). But simply reigning with Christ was not enough. James and John wanted to know who would reign *closest* to Christ. So they wanted to go ahead and settle the issue, as we shall see.

So what about you? Do you aspire to greatness, or a great heavenly reward? Would you like to be on top? It is characteristic of human nature to want to be served and tell others what to do. Most of us want to be king of our own little kingdom, whether it is a family, or circle of friends, or business, or even our church. Well, Jesus has much to say about that attitude, and I want to share His teaching with you. I will show you that the pathway to true and lasting greatness is quite different from the way the world seeks greatness.

Now my first appeal to our hearts is this:

## I. SHUN A SELF-CENTERED AMBITION FOR GREATNESS

In v.35 we see that James and John approached Jesus. They were interested in obtaining a special favor from Jesus. Have you ever asked someone for a special favor? Well, we see from our text that they gave:

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew’s account of the story of our text follows that promise in 20:20ff. Also, Jesus gave a parable about future rewards in His kingdom and said in Luke 19:17, “Well [done], good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.”

A. A Preliminary Request – In the last of v.35 James and John<sup>2</sup> asked, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.” They didn’t come straight out and ask for the two most prominent positions in the kingdom. Instead, they asked Him to make a commitment to grant whatever they asked.<sup>3</sup> Children and young people, if you really want something, why don’t you try this approach with your parents and just ask them to grant whatever you ask. Do you think that will work?

In v.36 Jesus replied, “What do you want Me to do for you?” Notice that Jesus refuses to commit Himself to “whatever” they asked. He’s too smart for that! Making blind promises is wrong. Think of Herod’s promise to grant his step-daughter Salome anything, up to half his kingdom! (Mark 6:22). She made her request, he felt obligated to grant the beheading of John the Baptist, something he did *not* want to do!

There is a lesson here about prayer. Prayer is not a blank check from God. He will answer our prayers favorably *if* they are according to His will, as stated in 1 Jn. 5:14-15. God does not answer selfish prayers. James 4:3 says, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (ESV). God wants to give us what is best for us, not merely what we want. He denies some of our requests for our good or the good of others or for the sake of His kingdom. In the model prayer Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done” (Mt. 6:10) prior to offering any requests.

So Jesus did not fall for the bait of granting *any* request. Therefore, Jesus asked them to state their request. Then we see in our story:

B. A Bold Request – In v.37 they said to Him, “Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.” They wanted to have the two highest positions of authority next to Jesus! To sit at His right hand would bestow the greatest honor and authority (1 Kings 2:19; Psa. 110:1, etc.).

Now why would they even think of such a request? They were right in believing in the many prophecies that a son of David would rule over a messianic kingdom. They believed that *Jesus* was that promised king and He would one day reign on earth, seated on the throne of His glory. Look back at the last words of chapter 8, v.38. There Jesus talks about coming “in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” They believed that the establishment of the kingdom was very close at hand (cf. Lk. 19:11). In spite of growing opposition, they never doubted that Jesus would triumph.

Yet who would sit closest to Him? Well, James and John thought they had a good shot at getting those two seats. After all, in chapter 9 they were only 2 of 3 disciples that got a vision of Jesus in His glory on the mount of transfiguration. That’s because they were in the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples.<sup>4</sup> On top of that, they were probably related to Jesus through their mother. Surely, the cousins of Jesus would have an advantage! Their father had a fishing business and apparently his family was better off financially than most (Mark 1:20). So James and John could just see themselves reigning right next to Jesus in the kingdom to come!

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<sup>2</sup> The gospel of Matthew tells us that the mother of James and John was involved in this request. The boys must have put their mom up to this, and she was more than willing to ask this favor for her sons. What mom does not want her children to succeed in school, in extracurricular activities, and in life? Luke’s account omits any reference to such a request, perhaps to spare the apostles such unfavorable reporting.

<sup>3</sup> Shortly thereafter, Jesus did say in Mk. 11:24, “Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive [them], and you will have [them].”

<sup>4</sup> See 9:2; 5:37; 14:33. Their mother seems to have been a sister or cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus (cf. Mt. 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25).

The desire for such greatness was not necessarily wrong in itself. Paul said in 1 Timothy 3:1, “If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.” Sometimes we may sincerely want a high position for a noble purpose. High position gives you greater influence, and you may be able to do more good with greater influence. Perhaps they just wanted to be as near as possible to Jesus. They did love Him.

But were they right to ask they have the chief seats next to Jesus? Jesus did not rebuke them directly. However, their request demonstrated how little they understood of what Christ had just revealed to them (vv.33-34). He wasn’t going to Jerusalem to claim the throne but to suffer and die. Based on what follows, there were other problems with their request. So notice with me:

C. What Was Wrong with their Request – I see at least 4 things wrong or misguided about their request:

1. It Demonstrated Selfish Ambition – It is clear to me that prideful, selfish ambition was playing a role here. They desired that the two most honorable places should be assigned, not to Peter, the leader of the disciples, or to his brother Andrew, or to Philip and Bartholomew, but to themselves! Christ was only thinking of others as He was on His way to the Cross. But they had their thoughts centered on self-advancement in the kingdom. They still dreamed of temporal crowns and earthly rewards.

We must guard our hearts against *selfish* ambition. Paul said in Php. 2:3, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.” As lay leaders are chosen in this church, do you get upset when you or a family member is not chosen?

2. Selfish Ambition Leads to Conflict - In v.41 we read, “And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant<sup>5</sup> at James and John” (ESV). They could not believe the audacity of James and John. They thought, “How dare these two men try to get ahead of *us* in the Kingdom! They were upset that James and John wanted to be on top because they had their *own* desires for prominence. The bitter feeling threatened what little harmony the apostolic band had. Selfish ambition will always lead to envy<sup>6</sup> and conflict and will destroy unity among believers. In fact, this conflict over who would be the greatest continued on the night of the Last Supper (Lk. 22:24).

Now James and John were wrong in their ambitious request, but the other disciples were wrong in their reaction. Jesus had to correct the whole group. The 10 remind me of Joseph’s brothers who were jealous toward him. Joseph had dreams of being on top, of even ruling over his brothers, and they became jealous to the point of wanting to kill their own brother! Watch out for jealousy and envy! Furthermore, the other 10 probably would not have been upset had it not been for the probable fact that *they* wanted these highest positions for themselves. I can imagine Peter thinking, “Remember me, *I* have been the leader of this group all along. I’m the one who walked on water! I was the one that spoke up and confessed that Jesus is the Messiah. I should be the one who reigns next to Jesus!”

The ambition of clergymen is a great scandal in the church, and frequently causes rivalries, enmities, divisions, and schisms.

3. Selfish Ambition Is Worldly – I wish the modern church would listen to the biblical teaching that we are *not* to follow the world but we are to follow Christ. So Jesus says, “You guys are being worldly in your ambition.” After all, Jesus said in the last of v.42, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones

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<sup>5</sup> That’s a better translation of *aganakteo* than the NKJV “to be greatly displeased.”

<sup>6</sup> See Rom. 13:13b; 1 Cor. 3:3; Php. 1:15; 1 Tim. 6:4.

exercise authority over them.”<sup>7</sup> Do you think that most of our political leaders seek office for the benefit of the people they represent, or for their own benefit? Oh, they want you to believe that they ambitiously seek high office for your benefit. In fact, in Luke’s account of this story, it is stated that Gentile rulers even claim to be benefactors of the people (Luke 22:25). Back in the day when we had a truly Christian nation, we had quite a few statesmen who held office to serve God and serve the people. But as our nation has turned from Christ, we have more and more political leaders who seek office for self-centered reasons: to exercise power, to gain fame, to have servants, and to obtain financial benefits. Many politicians become millionaires while in office.

So Jesus points out here that their attitudes demonstrated the way worldly people think. Like many people today, the disciples were making the mistake of following the wrong examples. Instead of modeling themselves after Jesus, they were admiring the glory and authority of the Roman rulers. They were on the wrong path to obtain eternal greatness in the kingdom of God.

The people of God get into trouble when we try to model ourselves after the world. After all, any greatness we achieve in this world comes to an end, typically within 20-30 years if not before. We are not to follow this old sinful world; we are to follow Jesus!

There is fourth problem with their request:

4. Rewards Are Sovereignly Bestowed by God - Jesus said in v.40, “to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but [it is for those] for whom it is prepared<sup>8</sup>.” Matthew’s account is more explicit, “. . . [it is for those] for whom it is prepared by My Father” (20:23b). No one can choose his or her own place in the kingdom. The final assignment of destiny is the prerogative of God.

So we are to shun selfish ambition for worldly position, power, and fame. Instead, we should:

## II. FOLLOW THE PATH OF TRUE GREATNESS

Does God offer the reward of greatness? Will some have higher positions of authority (Luke 19:13-25) in the kingdom of Jesus than others? Will someone be seated next to Jesus in the coming kingdom? Yes indeed. You can be one of the great leaders in the kingdom of Jesus! Jesus did not rebuke a desire for greatness. Instead, He explained the *true* path to greatness. And the great reward that Jesus offers is eternal, not just temporal. You may be surprised by the prescription of greatness that Jesus gives here in this text, for it is a complete reversal of popular opinion. Here is what you need to understand:<sup>9</sup>

A. Greatness Requires a Sacrificial Commitment to Christ – Jesus here reminds them that a request for glory is actually a request for suffering. Jesus said in v.38, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Jesus uses two Jewish metaphors here. It was a custom at a royal banquet for the King to hand the cup to his guests. The cup therefore became a metaphor for the life and experience that God hands out to men (Psalm 75:8). To “drink the cup” means to fully undergo this or that experience given by God. The cup could refer to something good, as in Psalm 23:5, “my cup runneth over” (cf. also Ps. 16:5; 116:13). But more often than not, it preferred a cup of suffering or

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<sup>7</sup> Note that Hebrew poetic parallelism here.

<sup>8</sup> This is most likely a "divine passive."

<sup>9</sup> Luke adds another character quality that will be rewarded with greatness in the Kingdom, and that is faithfulness. Luke 22:28 says, “you are those who have continued with Me in My trials.”

divine wrath (Ps. 75:8; Isaiah 51:17, 22). Drinking the cup points to Christ's active obedience to suffer and die for others. Note that Jesus had just warned about His pending suffering in Jerusalem (vv. 33-34). Later in the Garden of Gethsemane He would refer to His suffering and death again as "the cup" (14:36), which He asked would pass from Him.

The word "to be baptized" does not refer to water baptism, but it also points to suffering, and it is probably used here in the figurative sense of "to be overwhelmed" by agony.<sup>10</sup> We sing the beloved hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul," and there is a line that says, "when sorrows like sea bellows roll." At times we are engulfed by wave after wave of sorrow. Has that ever been your experience? Well, Jesus knew He was to be plunged into the flood of horrible distress.

As for the disciples, Jesus had previously warned them of persecution they would face (4:17; 10:30; Mt. 5:10-12; 10:23). Would they be willing to experience the agony of suffering also? They seemed more interested in promoting self, but Jesus asked, "Are they willing to die to self?"

Notice their response. They said in v.39, "We are able." They sure were confident in themselves,<sup>11</sup> though we have to commend their intended loyalty to Christ! So Jesus said to them in the last of v.39, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized." The prophet Jesus knew that they would suffer. In fact, James was the first apostle to be martyred (Acts 12:2) and John suffered years later under Emperor Domitian and was banished to the island of Patmos in his old age and suffered much, including hunger, cold, and isolation (Rev. 1:9). Yes, they indeed drank that cup of suffering.

They were not the only Christians to do so. Within 60 years after the death of Jesus, the entire mighty Roman Empire began a war against the Christian faith. They demanded that Christians bow the knee to Caesar as Lord, and yet they could not do it because only Jesus is Lord. So they threatened to throw them to the lions, and did so. They poured pitch on their bodies, tied them to poles, and burned them to cast light on the darkness. They crucified some, and beheaded others. And yet, their war against God's people was an utter failure because Jesus has removed the sting and fear of death. They knew that through death they would pass into the presence of Jesus and enjoy eternal life in a heavenly kingdom.

It is easy to *say* we will endure anything for Christ, and yet most of us complain over the most minor problems. If you seek ease and comfort, you will never be great in God's Kingdom. If you would be near Jesus in His kingdom, you must be near Him now. You must be willing to obey Christ, and follow Him, even if He leads you down the path of suffering. If we would share His throne, we must bear His cross. Many people want glory, but they are not willing to suffer. The fact is that the path of suffering is a path to glory. I will also add that when you walk the pathway of suffering, God will make His presence manifest, especially if you look to Him in prayer.

So do you want to be great in the kingdom of God? Well then, are you willing to suffer ridicule from classmates or co-workers because you're a Christian, and because you don't do what they do? Are you willing to take jabs from unsaved family members because of your devotion to Christ? To receive the reward of greatness, you must be willing to pay the price of suffering. We must remain faithful to Christ in spite of hardships. Since Jesus was willing to suffer, and even die for us, we should be willing to suffer for Him! It is already costly to be a Christian in many other countries. I believe it is going to become more costly to be a practicing Christian even in the United States. Are you still interested in being great in the kingdom of God?

There is another requirement for greatness in the kingdom of God:

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Luke 12:50, "But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!"

<sup>11</sup> Yet in the short-term, they fled when Jesus was arrested (14:50), no doubt to avoid the same fate.

B. Greatness Requires Personal Service to Others – Notice what this involves:

1. We Must Reject the World's Way – Again, Jesus said in v.42, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.” The authoritarian ways of ancient rulers was well-known. Those who are rulers in this world exercise authority for their personal benefit. In this world greatness is determined by how many people you rule over. But Jesus clearly states in v.43, “Yet it shall not be so among you....” In the church there are to be no rulers, but only servant-leaders. Yet by the Middle Ages the Church turned against this clear teaching of Jesus and established ecclesiastical hierarchies and rulers. Their top rulers even had thrones, crowns and scepters, and the common people had to bow and kiss their hand or even their feet. However, our Baptist forefathers did understand this principle. So we do not have a hierarchy of priests, bishops, Cardinals, and a Pope. We are affiliated with our state and national Baptist conventions but those bodies do not rule over us. And no one person or small group in the church is given authority to dictate or rule with a heavy hand. And every time you have a power struggle in a local church, someone is violating what Christ is saying here. We should submit to one another (Eph. 5:21; 1 Pet. 5:5) and serve one another (Gal. 5:13b); not rule over each other. The leaders of this church: the pastors, deacons, Sunday School teachers, ministry directors, and team leaders are all to be servant leaders. We are first to serve Christ and to do *His* will, and then serve the best interest of God's people.

So what are we to do? What kind of leaders are we to be? What kind of Christians are we to be? We must reject the world's way and instead:

2. We Must Follow Jesus' Way - Jesus said in vv.43-44, “Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.” Notice the Hebrew poetic parallelism here. The first word translated “servant,” literally referred to one who waits on tables. The second word is translated “slave,” for that is the literal meaning. Greatness consists in self-giving, in the outpouring of the self in service to others for the glory of God. God's pattern in Scripture is that a person must first be a servant before God promotes him or her to be a ruler.

Joseph was a servant in Egypt before he became a ruler in Egypt by the Providence of God. Moses forsook the worldly power of Egypt and served his father-in-law in the backside of a desert before He became the leader of God's people. Joshua served Moses before he became the leader of Israel. David humbly served his father as a shepherd before God raised him up as the shepherd of His people. Unless we know how to obey orders, we do not have the right to give orders. What is it that makes a godly mother the queen of her children? Simply that all her life she has been their servant, and never thought about herself, but always about them.

When Cheryl was in the hospital and rehab for 2 ½ months last year, it was my privilege to serve her day and night and to be her advocate. I am thankful for several from this church who volunteered to come to the hospital to serve as well.

In addition to character (1 Tim. 3:2-12), service is one of the most important requirements for allocating spiritual leadership in the church. The only ones that are to be leaders among the people of God are those who have first demonstrated a servant spirit. In my church, Swift Creek Baptist, we would interview prospective deacons. One of the questions we asked was what kinds of service they were *currently* involved in. We would not approve a candidate for deacon service who was not actively serving the body of Christ in some other way. So if you are a S.S. teacher you are in that position to serve your class, to study hard and teach them the Word of God, and to minister to them. If you are a deacon, your role is not to rule the church, but to serve the church. The same is true of the lead pastor and elders. Are you serving your family, your church, and your fellow man?

Are you willing to serve in the nursery? Are you willing to serve for one of our meals here this church? These days more churches are seeking to serve their community in various ways. Are you willing to help serve?

Jesus did not just teach us about being a servant; He *showed* us by His *own* example. In v.45 Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” This is the key verse in the gospel of Mark. Whenever the Bible wishes to give the supreme example, it points to Jesus. Notice that Jesus came to us. He came from where? We know from other Scriptures that He came from heaven, with all of the glory and privileges He enjoyed. He was seated at the right hand of the Father. He came from a realm where myriads of angels adored and served Him. Yet when He came to earth, He “did not come to be served, but to serve...” He lived day after day in service to others, tirelessly healing the sick, doing other good works, training His disciples, and teaching the Word of God to hungry souls. He never sought recognition and honor but actually shunned it (7:36; 8:30; 9:9).

Then, His greatest act of service on our behalf was suffering and dying for us. Jesus went on to say that He had come “to give His life a ransom for many.” This passage is a clear proof of Christ’s substitutionary atonement. The word translated “for” (*anti*) properly means *in the place of* an not merely *on behalf of*. When He suffered, He suffered in our place. When He died, He died in our place. A ransom (*lutron*) was originally the price paid for the release of a slave.<sup>12</sup> Sin makes slaves of us. Sin condemns us. But Jesus redeemed us from our slavery to sin, and He set us free by the payment of His own blood. It cost Him a very high price. You see the price that Jesus paid when He was scourged, when He bore that crown of thorns, when He was mocked and flogged and when they nailed Him to the cross, and especially when He bore upon Himself the wrath of God against sin. Jesus Christ paid the ransom for our deliverance and as a result “many”<sup>13</sup> have been redeemed.

Don’t worry if you are one of the “many” that Christ died for. 1 Tim. 2:5-6 says, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all...” In one sense He died for all mankind, but since not all will be saved, He *effectively* died for “many.” Will you be one of the many who will be saved by the shed blood of Christ? The sacrificial love of Christ will provide the power and motivation for both salvation and service to Christ.

Don’t you want to be great in the Kingdom of God? Don’t you want a great reward? First, you must be willing to suffer and make sacrifices for Christ. Would you join me in making a new fresh commitment to follow Christ, regardless of the cost? Then, you must be willing to serve. Are you a servant? Do you have a servant’s heart? Or quite honestly, would you rather *be* served? Will you join me in making a new commitment to serve others with a servant’s heart? May we serve to meet the needs of others, to help bear burdens, or to ease suffering. If you will do this, you will be great in the kingdom of God.

Conclusion: Yes, a great reward awaits those who follow the example of Jesus Christ. If you follow Christ, even to the point of suffering, and if you serve others, then you will be great indeed. In Philippians 2, Paul wrote of Jesus becoming a servant, and even dying on the cross. Then he wrote, “Wherefore, God has highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name.” Peter wrote, “Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, and in due time, he will lift you up.”

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<sup>12</sup> The word was used in the LXX for the price paid for the redemption of the firstborn (Numbers 18:15).

<sup>13</sup> The “many” probably goes with the word “serve” as well. The great rulers of this world have many to serve them. In contrast, Christ came to serve many and even died for many.

If you want to be great, then follow the path to greatness that Jesus took, through humble service and sacrifice for others.

Before you can be great in the coming kingdom of God, you must first *enter* the kingdom by repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. He died on the cross to save you from your sins. Make sure you will be among the many who will enter the kingdom of God. Jesus said in John 3:3, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Have you been born again? If not, turn to Christ and be saved today!

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956); Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); James A. Brooks, *New American Commentary: Mark* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2024; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Mark* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 7 & 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from sermon tape of 2/12/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).