

Kingdom Ambition

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 10:32-45

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Good morning. It's good to be with you this morning and the privilege to open up God's word and see what God has for us. And if you have your Bibles, please turn to Mark Chapter 10. This morning we'll be looking at verses 32-45. Today's passage is the climax to the middle section of the Gospel of Mark. And we see a cycled repetition. It's the third time that Jesus teaches us through the conversations with his disciples of what it means to follow him. Jesus is further showing his disciples what it means for the last...I'm sorry...for the first to be last and the last to be first. Please stand with me, if you're able, and let us hear God's word. Mark 10:32-45.

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, ³³ 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. ³⁴ And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

³⁵ 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." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ 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?" ³⁹ And they said to him, "We are able." 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, ⁴⁰ 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." ⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. ⁴² 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. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. 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 the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) You may be seated. Let's pray together. Holy God would you teach us from your word. Would you encourage our spirits. Would you cultivate hope in us to endure all the myriad of things that are going on our lives and also all of the evil around us, especially what is before us this weekend in Charlottesville. Help us to understand your ways. Help us to walk in your ways, knowing that we do so because you love us and we want to follow you. Help us to do so. In Jesus' name. Amen.

There are moments in history when the present intersects with the past. Even multiple points

of the past can seem to fold in on itself and create multiple layers of intersection. And those folds begin to act like a doorway. Events arise and time seems to fold. And each second pulses with both familiarity, but also uncertainty. It feels as if we have been here before, but we anxiously await what the next second might bring.

For the disciples, they have lived life with Jesus for several years up to this point. They have shared meals together. They've spent countless hours walking and talking together. They have witnessed and they have participated in Jesus's ministry, which privileged them to hear and see amazing things. Jesus taught with authority, which contributed to the religious leaders feeling challenged. Jesus healed many people, sometimes with his touch, sometimes with his words. Jesus was proving himself time and time again that he was the Messiah, the Son of Man, who would come and restore David's throne and usher in a new day for the people of Israel. I'm sure the disciples were captivated by Jesus's ministry, though often confused. And they must've been in a constant state of just curiosity of what's he going to do and say next.

Whether it is realized or not, these are the moments where ambition thrives. What do I mean by ambition. Ambition often relates to a strong desire to do or achieve something. Our ambitions are a mirror into the things we desire, the things we long for. They mirror our hopes and dreams. They are the motivators in our life that seek to bridge the way things are now and the way things—at least from our vantage point—we would like them to be.

Today's passage discusses the ambition of the disciples, but more importantly the passage highlights what drives Jesus. And by seeing Jesus, we learn that the Kingdom of God transforms our ambitions. The Kingdom of God transforms our ambitions. And so how does it do this. How does the Kingdom of God transform our ambitions. Well, first we're going to look at the text and how it shows that Jesus challenges our ambition that greatness is obtained by **getting** from others. And then we're going to look at how Jesus redirects our ambition for greatness through **giving** to others.

So first, looking at how Jesus challenges our ambition that greatness is obtained by **getting** from others. In verses 35-37 we see James and John, two of Jesus's disciples. They make a request to Jesus. They first approach him by saying, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

By now Mark has prepared us, the reader, to look for a pattern. This is not the first time Jesus has said something like he does in that description of, like, verses 33-34, where he is laying out what he's going to be doing in Jerusalem. This is the third time. The first time was in Mark 8:31. The second time was in Mark 9:31. And each time Jesus mentions that he will be delivered over, that he will be killed, and that he will be raised. And each time that he does that, the next step of the pattern is that the disciples misunderstand what he's saying. And the next step out of the pattern is that Jesus kind of unpacks what it means to follow him, of discipleship. The first time, when Peter rebuked him, Jesus spoke of the cost of following him. The second time the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest, and Jesus said that being first meant being last of all. This third time, James and John want something from Jesus.

So what did they want? Verse 36. "Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." So before we go any further with that, let's just kind of note what James and John get right about their request—implying that there's things that they get wrong. But first, it's natural and

it's good that James and John would go to Jesus as the one who could provide what they want. See, they learn from the rich young man not to call Jesus 'good teacher,' so they call him 'Teacher.' And they also learn from that interaction with the rich young man what one must do to inherit eternal life. And then after learning that all things are possible with God, they were encouraged to hear from Jesus in verses 29 and 30 of all of the rewards associated with leaving everything and following him. It's a simple cost benefit analysis, right? Do I get more out of what I put in? That is pleasing to the ear when we see and think of, you know...and it's also fine, you know, that it's not inherently evil to be driven by rewards.

So, it's somewhat commendable that they would go to Jesus and simply and directly ask. James and John were connecting the dots between Jesus's role as the Messiah, the fact that they were progressing ever more closely to Jerusalem, and Jesus kept talking about rising again. They didn't fully understand what, but they knew something was about to go down. They knew of God's reign over God's people in the land through the throne of David. They knew that the resurrection of life and the things to come at the end of days were connected. And so perhaps in their thinking, perhaps they were motivated by common discussions about how the Messiah would be a political savior.

But how does Jesus engage with them? How does he respond—verse 37—to their request. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left hand, in your glory." What are they asking? They're asking to be in positions of honor, esteem, and privilege that comes with being associated with Jesus. By sitting, instead of reclining at the table—thinking of food and banquets—by sitting it implies that they are seeking authority and position alongside Jesus in the kingdom to come.

The dynamic demonstrated by this ambition of James and John, and then likewise the indignance, as it says, that the other ten had when they heard of it. So you can imagine this picture of James and John kind of trying to get closer to Jesus. The other ten had to be nearby, because they heard and they became mad and jealous, which reveals their own ambitions. James and John just got there first, so, you know, I'm mad. They're there first asking what I'm wanting to ask.

But this is a common dynamic. It's a common dynamic among humans. It's a common dynamic in the family of God. And it was common for me even when I was in college. In college I was part of a college ministry that focused on evangelism and discipleship by cultivating intentional life-with-life relationships. I grew in my faith. I came to understand the grace of Jesus Christ. My life flipped upside down. I began seeing my need for Jesus. I began growing in my desire to spend time with him and with his church. And as my understanding of the grace that comes through the cross that's always in the background and is getting closer, as it were, in this section of Mark, my faith deepened, but also my prideful ambition played a part. It's very easy to fall into comparisons. Well, I'm not like that person. She's friendlier than me. He has more charm than I do, and so more people are gravitating towards him. I may not be as engaging, but at least I'm in a Bible study with the main leader. I've got that going for me.

We can be driven in all sorts of ways, and it's different for each person. But ambition may mean getting that acclaim that you're longing for, that sense of admiration and praise, that desire of working hard for success and whatever that success might bring to you: status, possessions, security. Or—this is a little inverted, but it can also look like giving yourself away in order to

receive something from that person. It can feel like serving, it can look like giving, but it's actually self-serving and transactional. By being consumed with who can mentor me and worried by who can I mentor, I often miss out on focusing on Jesus and his love for me, and how he would have me love others.

And so Jesus answers James and John with what is true greatness in his kingdom. The disciples were expecting a political messiah—we've already covered this—a leader who is to march on the capital of the nation and restore order, reputation, and the glory of Israel. They knew oppression, being sent in exile, coming back to a broken land, being under occupation from outside nations. They longed for the glory to come. And they knew when the Messiah would come and reign upon the throne of David once again, there would be restoration. There would be this kind of healing in the land from the long history of both Israel's rebellion and also their brokenness which came with shame and exile and subjugation.

Now I mention that James and John get something wrong, right? Well here's two things. In Jesus's kingdom, glory and greatness don't come through worldly ambition that seeks the welfare of self, that seeks the welfare of self at the expense of anything or anyone that inhibits your gain. In Jesus's kingdom, glory and greatness come through an ambition that seeks the welfare of others, even at the expense of self, that multiplies their gain. Let me say it again, because this is important of what Jesus is honing in on. Glory and greatness don't come through worldly ambition that seeks the welfare of self at the expense of anything or anyone that inhibits your gain. Kingdom ambition is one of glory and greatness that comes through seeking the welfare of others, even at the expense of self, so that others may flourish, so that their gain would multiply. You see, the disciples—their ambition blinded them. But even so, Jesus loved them and he challenged their notion of what greatness meant. His kingdom transforms our ambition.

Secondly, we're looking at how Jesus redirects our ambitions for greatness through giving to others. Verses 35-45 discusses the very crux of the Gospel. Jesus is self-aware to his purpose and the desire for how his disciples should lead after he is gone. Jesus uses very powerful images that reveal that he knows what is going to happen when he goes to Jerusalem. The obvious is that he has now three separate times discussed that he would be delivered over to the authorities, then he would be delivered over to the Gentiles, meaning the Roman authorities at the time. And then you see by this prediction he knows what's going to happen. He's familiar with Roman jurisdiction and their legal practices of capital punishment. Mocking and spitting were forms of derision and ridicule. Flogging was the practice of Roman scourging which involved further humiliation, whipping and tearing of the flesh.

And then the mode that would finally bring upon his death is an anticipation of the Roman cross, the crucifixion, which was so vile even in their day it was distasteful for Roman citizens to even use the word. Crucifixion was a slow, humiliating painful way to die. And that was purposeful. Crucifixion was a public execution declaring the status of the condemned and [giving a] warning to all those who watched: Don't be like this guy. Don't do what he did, because we will squash you.

In discussing with James and John he is self-aware about the cup and the baptism. The Cup. The cup, often in the scriptures, discusses the wrath of God. Judgment to be drunk in full to the last dregs. The baptism that Jesus refers to is interesting in that the way he's using it is really not

used anywhere else in the New Testament. The way he's using it is actually more familiar with just kind of common Greek at the time of just kind of being overwhelmed, in that picture of just being really like underwater and just consumed by the circumstances. But also it's not that far removed from John's baptism, which was connected to repentance.

And so he asked James and John: Can you drink the cup? Can you be baptized? And they think Jesus is asking hey, are you ready to fight? Are you loyal enough? Are you courageous enough to do what we're about to go do. We're about to go just walk up on Jerusalem, and things are going to get hairy. Are you ready? And they think they are, but they don't know what they're asking.

Verse 44 and 45 discuss the meaning of Jesus being delivered. And what does he say: The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve as a ransom for many. That word *ransom* is so core to the gospel of Christianity, that Jesus is purchasing something. That's what the word ransom is. It's buying back. It's playing the Redeemer. It's being the one that redeems someone out of bondage. And he says that out of my ministry here—my teaching, my healing—this is why I came. To be a ransom.

So, do you see Jesus? And what I mean by that is, do we see the connection between who he is as the Son of Man and do we acknowledge his role as the king, the king who by the world's standards suffers humiliation in order to bring about victory. And do we understand that this king is the Redeemer who pays the ransom himself. Do you see your sin is paid in full? Do you rejoice and do you celebrate this fact? Our hatred for others has been ransomed. Our coveting what others possess has been ransomed. Our sexual sins have been ransomed. Our fear of the future, the insatiable quest to be self-reliant is ransomed. We have a redeemer who has purchased us with a price through his death on a cross and his resurrection from the grave.

Now that's something unique that only Jesus can do. Now he's very tightly connecting what he is doing and what he's calling his disciples to do, also. So there is an important piece of separating what does Jesus do uniquely in bringing about salvation, but then likewise, how do we understand that as an example and what we should do as Christians. We can only imitate Christ in so far as his example, and to lead as that example to others. And that in itself again points back and glories in his unique sacrifice as being a substitute for us, a ransom for our sins.

And likewise, a huge implication of this for Christians is how we actually lead. I mean, that's the crux of what he brings up when he talks about the rulers of the Gentiles and the great ones. It's not necessarily implying specific offices, but just a sense of how the world understands leadership and how the world may understand how you lead and control or coerce. How do you lead? And Jesus is specifically giving a counter example of what not to do. Namely, don't be like the Gentiles. Rather, be like me. Follow me.

And this has far reaching implications. How do you parent your children? How do you lead your employees? How do you seek to engage in the public square, whether that's the democratic process and discussing policy, maybe being involved in that process yourself. How do we engage in interacting with Facebook? And the far reaching implications of community. To desire to see this more and more lived out in the body of Christ. That how even thinking about a simple structure of community groups is not meant just to be a place that we can go and be with our friends and hang out. It is a place where we seek to imitate Christ. It's a place that we

live out our redemption. Where we get to put off the old and put on the new. Where we get to encourage one another, where we get to share burdens. The opportunity to live life with one another. The increased connections with fellow neighbors who may be fellow Christians or who may not know Christ. But in community we are both seeking to follow Jesus and grow in him, and we're also as a community seeking to be a witness to the watching world, representing him. And it's a place to pray and to love and to serve together.

A lot of my sermon changed last night, just in reflection from yesterday. Much good has taken place in two thousand years since Jesus lived. And we should be very grateful. We should praise God for the work that he has done and that he is still doing all across the world. How he has used sons and daughters redeemed to live in his kingdom in ways that experience his grace, but then also extends it to others. But unfortunately where there has been oppression, injustice, and war it is often an opportunity, an opportunity that makes us uncomfortable to be exposed, to be revealed, that often the sons and daughters have failed to serve Christ and to serve others as Christ has served and to love others as Christ has loved us.

The first African slaves came to the American colonies in 1619. Slave labor was not the predominant form of labor at that time, but that began to dramatically shift during the period of about right around 1680 to 1700. There was a huge shift in the demand. By 1660 the population in Virginia was divided into six distinct social and economic classes. Indians. Slaves, which made up a small minority of the labor force of that time. Servants, which were indentured for a specific time and often for specific purpose. Freed men, who were former indentured servants, but either because of their own debt or [because] they just were unable to purchase land, they were just considered freed men. And they were free, but they had to kind of live on their own and make their own ends meet. The fifth category were commonly called householders. And these were freed men who were able to purchase a home and some land. And six were the great men. And the great men were the large, influential landowners. And they made up the House of Burgesses at the time.

And so this is where history folds and we see doorways. And it feels like you can step through one side of the door and be in the past and step through the other door and you can experience yesterday. In 1662 the Virginia House of Burgesses enacted a law that declared that the child of a slave would be born as a slave, even if the father were free. So unlike English law, the condition of the child was according to the condition of the mother. This act also made it punishable for any Christian to fornicate with a Negro man or woman. Now this is where it starts getting troubling and confusing, because they use that word Christian. So just imagine people living together. There's freed men, there's servants, there are slaves. There's this hustle and bustle, a lot of things going on.

And you start using a word *Christian*, and it becomes problematic because out of good desire, but also by the mercy of God, African slaves heard the message of the Gospel and began converting to Christianity. And so what do you do when there is a law that says no Christian can do this, but now your slaves are becoming Christians. What do you do. So in 1667—so five years later from the one I've just mentioned—there was an act that was declared stating this. And I want to read the whole thing. “Whereas some doubts have risen whether children that are slaves by birth and by the charity and piety of the owners made partakers of the blessed sacrament of baptism, should by virtue of the baptism be made free...” So let me pause. So the law is an occasion of people are wondering what do we do. Our slaves and our servants are

becoming Christians. There is a very appropriate response of recognizing hey, I think something might have to change with this relationship. What do we do. Well, whereas some doubts have arisen, let the doubts be...squashed. "It is enacted and declared by this Grand Assembly and the authority thereof, that the conferring of baptism doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom. That divers masters freed from this doubt may more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity by permitting children, though slaves, or those of greater growth capable to be admitted to that sacrament."

By these declarations two things happened. We see the beginning moments where *Christian* began and became conflated with *those of European descent*. The construct of race was created. And the second thing, the development of perpetual race-based chattel slavery. So if it's through the line of the mother and if you're a slave for life and if you have children, they're born slaves. They're slaves for life and so on and so on. And then if this is the way it is, then you have to create new laws. Because what happens if a slave wants to be free and runs away? Well, what's your right for their property, for them as your property. And it gets much more muddled. Much more diabolical from there. From there the laws kept coming to codify the economic relationship between masters and slaves. No longer was the question of friend or brother, or God forbid, wife, child.

So imagine this. Imagine the four hundred years of history since then if someone, if someone had stood up, if one of the great men in the Virginia House of Burgesses stood up and said: Wait, wait a minute, brothers. This thing we are doing is not good. Our Savior Jesus said emphatically "It shall not be so among you." And what if that person went on to say: Brothers, Jesus himself came not to be served but to serve. By giving his life as a ransom he purchases our freedom from the bondage of sin and death. Brothers, therefore we must not seek our own ambitions at the expense of other people's bodies. We must not seek our own ambition at the expense of other fathers' dreams for their families. Our ambition at the expense of other mothers' love for their children. Our ambition at the expense of another man's wife. Our ambition at the expense of other children's hopes for their life ahead. Our ambition at the expense of other people made in the image of God, intended to be redeemed by the Savior.

And what if that person said: Brothers, we have no right to do this. It is sin. We must repent or else hear the Lord himself say of us, the voice of Abel's blood is crying out to me from the soil. Brothers and sisters, Jesus is the substitute who paid the ransom is good news for me of European descent and to everybody else on this planet who is made in the image of God. It is our faith, it is our hope, and we can rejoice for all eternity. But brothers and sisters, we must have our ambitions transformed by the kingdom of God with those of the redeemed by the blood of our Savior who died. That in his death we may live with him, that in him we have reconciliation with God and with each other as we share in his death and share in his resurrection.

Our ambition must be transformed by his grace to serve for the flourishing of others instead of the gain for self. It makes all the difference in how we view God and how we view others. Who we view as a brother and sister, who we view as an enemy or a friend. It's to recognize that to see people as God sees them, as an image bearer, who is both rebellious, yes, but also completely distorted and marred and broken because of sin. And we see a creator who also becomes a redeemer that delivers. And so where he was delivered up to die as a condemned criminal, handed over to the Gentiles—in that act he actually becomes the Redeemer of them,

the Gentiles of the nations. It makes all the difference how we see God and how we see each other. May his grace completely overwhelm us. May we be mindful of his life and his death and his resurrection. And even as we move into this next section of the Gospel of Mark, it is a focusing in on really what was at stake, and what it took to make it happen.

And so if you are a Christian, praise God, because you have no right to be. And yet you are one by the mystery and the power and the beauty of the gospel. You are alive from death to life. May we hope and long for others who do not know Jesus yet. And in so doing, we have now been given a task of what it means to represent and to witness and to love as Jesus loves.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do desperately need your grace. We need your grace to endure hard things that in many ways have nothing to do with us as far as maybe the past, but we live in the consequences of them and it impacts us today. Help us with your grace to lament, seeking your kingdom come and grieving that it's not here in its fullness. But you likewise teach us to lament and never lose hope. May we do that as a community. May we do that as your church. That we would truly be transformed by your goodness, and by being transformed may we be agents and ambassadors of how we can show the love of Christ to others. Help us, O God. In Jesus' name. Amen.