

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/20/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, October 20th

Mark 10:35-45

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A revolt in the inner circle?

This week's text immediately follows Jesus' third prediction of his death and resurrection to His disciples. Following the pattern of the other two predictions, the disciples demonstrate how they do not understand Messiahship and the nature of the Kingdom. This time there is a leadership revolt within Jesus' inner circle. James and John attempt to displace Peter from his default leadership role. Jesus uses this example to discuss the nature of Gentile leadership and the standards for Christ's disciples.

Mark 10:35-45 Commentary

This week's text is the closing text of a long section of text bookended by two blind healings:

TWO-STAGE HEALING OF A BLIND MAN AT BETHSAIDA [8:22-26]

Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ [8:27-30]

I. Jesus foretells His death and resurrection [8:31]

1. Disciples misunderstand [8:33] - Peter rebukes Jesus

i. Jesus explains further [8:34-38]

II. Jesus foretells His death and resurrection revealing more details [9:30-32]

2. Disciples misunderstand [9:33-34] - Argue who is the greatest

ii. Jesus explains further [9:35-37]

III. Jesus foretells His death and resurrection revealing even more details [10:32-34]

3. Disciples misunderstand [10:35-37] - The request of James and John

iii. Jesus explains further [10:38-45]

HEALING OF BLIND BARTIMAEUS [10:46-52]

The section opens with the two-stage healing of the blind man (unique to Mark), perhaps signifying spiritual understanding does not come all at once. The Gospel then pivots on Peter confessing Jesus as the Christ. Now Jesus expands on what this means to His disciples, and they demonstrate their misunderstanding which He attempts to correct. Every time this pattern is repeated, Jesus reveals more about His death and resurrection. Included between the two bookends are further teachings of Jesus that contrast the Kingdom of God with the worldly kingdom. We also find the Transfiguration followed by the disciples' inability to heal the boy with an unclean spirit which is blamed on their lack of faith. This lack of faith contrasts with the persistency of Bartimaeus' faith in the closing bookend.

This week's text follows the third and final foretelling of Jesus' death and resurrection (not included in the lectionary). Following the above pattern, James and John demonstrate they still do not understand the true nature of the Kingdom and Jesus uses this opportunity to explain further. This culminates in what many believe is the theme verse for Mark's Gospel (10:45).

So, following on from the Rich Young Man (10:17-31) and Jesus foretelling His death a third time (10:32-34), this week's text begins:

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."

James and John are part of Jesus' inner circle (along with Peter). They were both with Him on the mountain top during the Transfiguration. Even if they did not fully understand what is about to happen to Jesus, they know they are on their way to Jerusalem, and this may be one of the last opportunities they have to petition Jesus for any special requests. Jesus does not judge their initial question, He simply asks them, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" This is the same question Jesus will ask of Bartimaeus (10:51). James and John demonstrate they are still misunderstanding Jesus as the Christ or Messiah. They are essentially requesting to be Jesus' number 1 and number 2 in His glory [*Kingdom* in the Matthew parallel (20:21)] and are thus still thinking in terms of worldly positions. This would of course usurp Peter's position. Perhaps there is a link here to earlier where John tells Christ how they tried to stop another exorcist who was not following them (9:38-41). The Sons of Thunder still have their thunder!

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."

Jesus has just told them they are going up to Jerusalem and He will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes. Jesus will be condemned to death and delivered over to the Romans. He will be mocked, spat on, flogged, and killed. Not surprisingly, Jesus cautions James and John that they do not know what they are asking. Jesus follows up and asks them if they can drink the cup that He must drink (the pouring out of God's wrath) or be baptized with the baptism He must face (the suffering and death that will pour over Him). Perhaps James and John understand this as being willing to fight by Jesus' side since and they respond, "*We are able.*" They would not be the first disciples willing to die for Christ. Consider the case of Thomas the Twin. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was dead, He called to His disciples to go with Him to Bethany. Jesus had only just escaped being arrested by the Jews for blasphemy. The journey to Bethany to visit the dead Lazarus was not without risk. It was Thomas who said to his fellow disciples, "*Let us also go, that we may die with him*" (John 11:16).

Jesus tells James and John that they also will undergo a form of suffering (by the time Mark was written James had already been martyred) but the places of honor were not His to grant. Jesus here is referring to the authority of the Father. When Jesus' prediction of His death is fulfilled by His crucifixion, the inscription of the charge read, "*The King of the Jews.*" Ironically, on that day those sharing in His "glory", on His left and right, were the two robbers crucified with Him (Mark 15:26-27).

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 final crescendo in the Mark narrative of Jesus' attempt at defining what it means to be first and great in the Kingdom. Here Jesus contrasts the Roman method of leadership where the rulers "*lord it over them*" (the Greek word used here, *katakryrieuousin*, has *kyrie* [lord] in its root) and "*their great ones exercise authority over them*." After Jesus caught His disciples arguing over who was the greatest, He said, "*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant [diakonos] of all*" (9:35). Here, Jesus ups the ante, "*... and whoever would be first among you must be slave [doulas] of all*" (v.44). The difference is clear in the use of the Greek words contextually translated for servant and slave. The passage closes with what is perhaps the theme verse for the Gospel of Mark and illustrates that Jesus Himself is willing to be the ultimate servant, "*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (v.45).

Reflection and Application

The text this week has a lot to say about the nature of leadership in the Kingdom and thus how Christians should seek to exercise their assigned authority within their professional and social networks. In Genesis 1:28, humans were given the responsibility to rule over all of creation as image bearers of God. The Fall screwed that up and since then we have had problems with exercising appropriate authority. As an example, Ezekiel 34:4 speaks against the so-called shepherds of Israel for putting their own interests first, exploiting the people, and ruling over them "*with force and harshness*." It is remarkable that not only were Jesus' twelve Apostles not exempt from such worldly desire for status (arguing among them who was the greatest), but even Jesus' inner circle experienced such infighting as this text demonstrates.

Leadership is often defined in its broadest context as exerting influence over others. In Jesus' day it was typical to exert influence through the coercive use of power, authority, and status. When taken to the extreme, this type of leadership can result in the oppression of the many. Such oppression is not limited to the worldly rulers of Jesus' day. Moreover, we only need to look back at the 20th Century to get a flavor for what leadership grounded in worldly values can create in societies. We sometimes kid ourselves that we do not live in such a society but since the pandemic, the veneer of presumed government benevolence is rapidly wearing away.

Jesus shows us another way to exert influence - by first being experienced as a servant by those we seek to influence. This style of leadership was visibly demonstrated when Jesus washed His disciples' feet:

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. (John 13:14-15)

This is the leadership style of Jesus. Even though He had the authority, He chose not to exalt Himself. This is how Jesus commands us to behave. How do you know if you have a servant attitude? By how you act when you are treated like one!