

# Servus

Job 38:1-7, 34-42 | Psalm 104:1-10 | Hebrews 5:1-10 | Mark 10:35-45

## MARK 10:35-45

<sup>35</sup> James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' <sup>36</sup> And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' <sup>37</sup> And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' <sup>38</sup> But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' <sup>39</sup> They replied, 'We are able.' Then 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; <sup>40</sup> 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.' <sup>41</sup> When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup> So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup> But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

## INTRODUCTION

I don't particularly like feet. And now that I think about it, as far as opening lines of sermons go, this is an unusual one. I don't like feet. Let me explain (lest you think I'm declaring my unreserved support of the metric system). Every year, in the spring, in the midst of an unrelenting barrage of my most favourite services, also known as Holy Week, there is the Maundy Thursday service. Every year. I dread it. Because, at some point during that service, I may be called upon to touch someone's feet. Feet are gross. Even if you're the sort of person who takes really good care of your feet and washes them properly everyday—which most people don't—and cleans the insides of your shoes every day, which most people don't—they still accumulate the dirt of the ground upon which you walk and hibernate in socks that absorb the moisture (sweat) that your feet produce. I spend a lot of time on airplanes, as you know, and you can tell when people take off their shoes. There is a smell. A locker room smell. A funky smell. The smell of feet. And feet are gross. And somehow, in the middle of the holiest of weeks and the most solemn and celebratory moments of our liturgical year as Christians, we take time to sit down, pull up a basin of water and a towel, and wash feet. And in case you didn't realize it, my feelings on the matter are affirmed by the service. When the feet come out, the whole service is about washing them. Feet are gross.

Why? Why do we do this? Because in that moment, the priest is meant to embody the humility, the commitment to service, the Christ-like that lowering of oneself that our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, demonstrated and articulated in our Gospel reading this morning. The point of the passage, and some would say a major point of the whole Gospel, is there in that last line: "*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*"<sup>1</sup> The passage really divides into two parts to make this point, a story at the beginning which then leads into some teaching from Jesus. Let's start with the story and the disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:45.

## 1. THESE DENSE DISCIPLES

The story begins with what seems like an audacious request. James and John pull Jesus aside and ask: *“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you... Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”*<sup>2</sup> It’s a bold request, to be sure, but maybe not exactly outside the realm of reason. Yes, it’s self-promotion. ‘You won’t get promoted if you don’t ask.’ And that is precisely for what they are asking. They want the seats of honour, the right hand and the left hand, in Jesus’s messianic glory. It might be tempting to overlook the boldness of the request and focus on the fact that they believe Jesus will come into glory—the fulfilment of the messianic promise of a triumphant king returning to Jerusalem. Here, on the road to Jerusalem, they really do believe Jesus will be crowned and come to rule God’s people as a glorified king. And so, their probing for positions of prominence makes sense.

The problem is that this request follows immediately after Jesus has just predicted his death. The two verses before our passages read: *“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”*<sup>3</sup> What’s more, this is the third time in three chapters that Jesus has predicted his suffering and death. The first time, Peter rebuked him. The second time, the disciples immediately started bickering over which one of them is the greatest. The surprise of this passage is not that James and John would be so audacious, it’s that the disciples haven’t actually learned yet. They seem to have only selectively heard Jesus. They’ve heard him talk about his messianic glory to come, and yet, somehow, they never quite internalized the part about suffering and dying before rising again. And having selectively heard what they want, they ask. James and John—two of three in Jesus’s inner circle. Indeed, this is the only time in the Gospel of Mark where they are mentioned without the third of the three, Peter. Think about the boldness of that, setting aside friendship with Peter, the ostensible leader of the group after Jesus, to go ask for a promotion over him, from a man who has just confided that he, himself, is on his way to his execution. And what’s more, James and John know it is indecorous. Their uncertainty about protocol is clear from the hedging of the first sentence: *“do for us whatever we ask of you.”*<sup>4</sup> And when Jesus asks them what they want him to do for them—the very same question that Jesus will ask blind Bartimaeus in the next passage after ours—they answer: ‘Give us positions of glory.’ Bartimaeus, by contrast, simply asks for sight and is commended for his faith.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus then reminds them what he’s been teaching all along. They will share in his glory, but suffering comes first. He uses two metaphors: the cup and baptism. The reference to the cup in this context points us to how the metaphor is typically used in the Old Testament, as a symbol of that which has been allotted by God, typically judgment and wrath.<sup>6</sup> It is later used as the primary symbol of God’s complete wrath in Revelation 16. Baptism, likewise, typically is

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:35-37.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:33-34.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:35.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10:46-52.

<sup>6</sup> Psa 11:6, Psa 16:5, Psa 23:5, Psa 75:8, Psa 116:13, Isa 51:17, 22, Jer 25:15-28, Jer 49:12, Hab 2:16.

associated with initiation—though in this case, it is initiation into suffering.<sup>7</sup> This is similar to how Paul will talk about being baptised into Christ’s death in his Epistle to the Romans.<sup>8</sup> Both metaphors, then, indicated to James and John what they and all the disciples have been missing: The messianic kingdom comes through great sacrifice.

## 2. THE SUFFERING SERVANT

At this point, the other ten, indignant at the preposterousness of this question, get schooled by Jesus. His teaching, his lesson in this moment, takes the form of proverbial wisdom: *“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”*<sup>9</sup> Some of these are ideas he’s already communicated to them. But the point is clear. The ethics of the messianic kingdom he is bringing about are the opposite of our world. Service to others first. Greatness does not come through self-promotion, but through self-sacrifice. Pride of place, first in line, the left and right hand in glory—these go to those who understand that the way of the kingdom is sacrificial service.

But, and this is important, it’s not just the pattern, set by Jesus and put before the disciples, that is in view here. It’s not just the ethic of the kingdom, but the means by which the kingdom comes about. That last line captures it: *“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*<sup>10</sup> Jesus’s sacrifice is not just the way of the Christian, it is how Jesus secured salvation. The language is that of ransom—a price to be paid for the debt of others, the blood to be sacrificed for the sin of others. The language here is borrowed from Isaiah 53, the song of the suffering servant:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed... For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people... Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin... The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.<sup>11</sup>

Servant. Payment. Giving his life. For the many. The language connects Jesus’s words to this picture of substitutionary atonement, the notion that Christ took upon him our sin in his death, and defeated sin and death on our behalf in his resurrection. This concept is also prefigured in that baptism and cup language from his earlier statements—and I believe no accident that the two sacraments are referenced here, as visible signs and means of grace that point us to this reality. Christ died for us that we might be saved.

## CONCLUSION

I probably don’t need to say a lot more. I hope and pray that you believe in this gospel, this truth that Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for us. And if you do, the pattern is clear and

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<sup>7</sup> Jesus seems to be first to use *baptism* as a metaphor for experiencing judgment and wrath, though the imagery of water overtaking someone is certainly familiar. See Psa 42:7, Psa 69:2, Isa 43:2. Peter picks up the notion of an early instance of God’s wrath—the flood—connected to baptism. See 1 Pet 3:18-21.

<sup>8</sup> See Rom 6:3-11.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 10:43-44.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 10:45.

<sup>11</sup> Isa 53:5, 8b, 10-11.

the kingdom ethic is right there. Look to how you might adopt a posture of service first, self last. It may be little things: Like when you're on the tram and everybody knows there's that seat in the back of each car that is a solo seat but not marked for the elderly, disabled, or pregnant people—and everybody rushes to that seat, sometimes even blocking people from coming off the tram. Why? Self first. 'Forget those other people. Put me in the seat of glory.' And you know the seat of glory is on the tram. Or I have a friend who is in a long-term battle with someone at Billa—someone who is hiding the good ice cream under other lesser flavours, stockpiling it hoarding it. They don't want other people to buy the good flavour. I could give other examples. But what if we tried to give up our seats on the tram? What if we put the best flavour of ice cream on top, hoping that other people will get to enjoy it. What if we joyfully take on the towel and the water basin and reach down to clean some gross, dirty feet? This is service. This is, and I'm returning to this notion in a sermon about every 2.5 years: this is *servus*. You know the Austrian greeting, the shortened form of *servus humillimus, domine spectabilis*—at your service, my Lord. Remembering Jesus's service at the cross, let us believe and be saved through his sacrifice, and then follow him in the pattern. "*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*"<sup>12</sup>

*Let me pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for saving us through the death and resurrection of your Son. May we join in becoming servants of all. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>12</sup> Mark 10:45.