

Humble Service

Mark 9:33-41; Mark 10:42-45

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As we go to the Lord's word this morning as we continue in this series "The Qualities of a Disciple," this morning, the quality is humble service. I think it's right for us in this country who are able to enjoy a much wider availability of structures that include doctors and hospitals and what has been, gratefully, a much greater distribution of vaccines than in other places in the world, I think it's important to humble ourselves to give thanks to God, but also to pray for India this morning.

I am greatly troubled by the news that is coming out of that country, and of the suffering that so many are facing. Perhaps you have friends and family who live in that country who in many ways feel trapped. We need to pray for them. And we need to pray that God would enable the countries of the world that have the ability, the freedom, and the power to help to do so. So let's go before the Lord this morning in humble service in praying for those who are in need, not only here but around the world. Let's pray together.

Father, we humble ourselves before you, and we want to thank you, first of all, that we live in a country that is so incredibly blessed. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord, for the frontline workers who are represented in this congregation, who are in this community, this region, and around the country who have served in such difficult, difficult circumstances, in a crisis that I know I have not experienced in my lifetime. Thank you for them. Thank you, Father, for those who continue to do this work on the frontlines whether in places around that country that are seeing an uptick of infections. Father, we pray that you would give them endurance. Father, we pray for an effective end to this pandemic and its spread and its hold on the life of the world in many ways. Whether it be through vaccines, whether it be through effective use of public policy, Lord, we ask for an end to this. And we would pray that we would be able to rejoice again without social distancing, without the use of masks, be able to join again fully. But until that day comes, we continue to recognize how frail we are and how frail the world is. We think of our neighbors in India and in South America. Though separated by thousands of miles, they are our neighbors because they are made in the image of God. And Father, we ask for relief and for mercy to those who are without a hospital bed, those who are without oxygen, those who are without the most basic use of medicine. Father, we pray, help the world that is free and empowered and whose cup overflows. Father, may we be able to serve them, for without India, without South America, without our neighbors who are greatly suffering, we are greatly impoverished. And when they hurt, we, too, hurt. So Father, we ask you for your grace and mercy this morning to be poured out on them and to all those who make decisions. May care and relief come quickly. Be with us now, Lord, as we turn in your word again to the qualities of a disciple. Make our hearts teachable, our eyes open, our minds alert that your Spirit is teaching us. But more than that, your Spirit seeks to shape us into the image of Christ. And may humble servants be more and more evident in our midst because of Jesus. We pray this in the name of Christ. Help the teacher. Amen.

We turn this morning to Mark 9 and Mark 10. Some would consider these as parallel passages, but of course they are sequential. And they give to us right in the heart of Jesus's ministry some private moment that He has with His disciples. And He means to use their failure to understand as a vehicle through which He calls us to greater understanding in what it means to be a disciple and what humble service looks like.

Turning to Mark 9 first and Mark 10 second. First, Mark 9:33-41.

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward." [ESV]

And then in Mark 10:42-45. Now we have a subset of the disciples questioning, arguing.

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. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In that great story about the nature of humans and character, power, and understanding, *Star Wars* stands out as a great picture into human nature. Darth Sidious, you *Star Wars* nerds know this, also known as Chancellor Palpatine in *The Revenge of the Sith*, he is of course a Machiavellian character who seeks to manipulate his position, manipulate himself into power, and then he seeks to use his power to do everything he can to keep it. He says these words with respect to that. Quote, "All who gain power are afraid to lose it," close quote. The biggest motivator, he is suggesting, for those in power is often their fear of actually losing it. Yes, and amen.

But this isn't just true of individuals. It is also true of organizations and institutions across the world and across cultures, that the chief desire of individuals and organizations, as one writer says, "is to attain or retain power." Yes.

Augustine, much earlier than any of those that I have just quoted, said this when asked about the ways of Christ and the ways of God. Augustine said in the fourth century, "If you would ask me what are the ways of God, I would tell you that the first is humility, that the second is humility, and that the third is humility. Not that there are no other precepts to give, but if humility does not precede all we do, our efforts will be fruitless." And by "fruitless," Augustine rightly points out is the ultimate legacy, the ultimate outcome of your work. It isn't to say, because that would be naïve, that in the short run, attaining and trying to keep power can be very effective in this world and gaining all kinds of fruits of power. But the question is ultimately, eternally, at a deep center of what it means to be humans whether individually or corporately, the actual fruit of this kind of use of power will be fruitless. And so Augustine rightly points out that is in contrast to how God reveals Himself.

From beginning to the end, God reveals Himself as one who has the characteristic of humility. And Jesus lays it out to His disciples in these private moments. Thanks be to God those private moments are

written for us, that the ones who received the teaching decided to record it. Why? Because they knew—only after the Spirit came, but they knew as they looked back that they were completely off track in understanding authority and power and the central place of humility as being the way of God, the way of Christ.

So this morning as we look at these two episodes, we're going to see how Jesus teaches about authority, first, through personal authority or, if you will, a positional authority. Secondly, relational authority. Finally, kingdom authority. Now, I want you to be clear in what I want for us to see in these two episodes. Jesus establishes that there is positional authority, there is relational authority, and there's kingdom authority. But in these two episodes, we see how He teaches us through demonstrating what it is not.

So let's look together first at positional authority. We're going to hold these two passages. Although they are sequential episodically, they are still parallel because Jesus is teaching similar things. Now, first, I want to say clearly that if one was to summarize positional authority in a question, it would be this. Who's the boss? And one of the things that Jesus teaches in the second episode is He's hearing and responding to the argument that He hears happening. He responds by simply saying to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority." And then in contrast, He says, "But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be" servant and then also must be slave.

Positional authority, Jesus establishes, first is two things. And there are two Greek words. First, it is the Greek word which means "lowliness" and then "service," from which we get the word "deacon" from. Not here speaking of the role in the church, which would be later established. It's talking about the characteristic of a servant or a slave. So this idea of both lowliness as well as service are the two traits that Jesus outlines to correct their understanding about position and that which turns the idea of authority and power on its head as it relates to the world.

Perhaps you have heard it said over the last number of months or weeks, people have asked the question, what is the greatest threat to the church in the world? Is the greatest threat from without or from within? To be very clear, Jesus would want His church to know that the world is not a threat to the church, meaning there is nothing that the world can do to threaten what He has done in His incarnation, death, and resurrection in bringing redemption to human hearts forming together the body of Christ. There is nothing that the world can do in all of its power and in all of its authority that can threaten what God has done. No reason for fear. But I would believe and suggest that there is something to be afraid of, and that is not the world but the understanding of the world being appropriated within the church.

And so Jesus sees something happening in the earliest days of those He's called to Himself, His disciples. And what He's laid out to them, He says, hey, being lowly, being a servant, being a slave to all is how you are to exercise your positional authority. Whatever precedes your name or follows your name, whatever condition, circumstance, or place that you find yourself in, positional authority is to be exercised in lowliness, to be a servant, and even be willing to be called a slave to all. But He says this to them because the greatest threat is not the institutions of the world, but the ways it understands positional authority. And the way the world understands positional authority, not in the 21st century but from the very beginning, is that if I have the opportunity to be in a position of authority and power or if I see the opportunity to attain it, or if I'm in fear of losing it, I must do everything I can because without it, I don't know how to live.

How is this happening in the life of the disciples? What was happening is what just precedes chapter 9. Jesus had clothed them with authority and given them power to actually perform exorcisms. They tasted a little bit of success but then failure. Then Jesus lays out for them just on the tails of their

failure to exercise appropriately through prayer that what Jesus had just clothed them with authority and power to do, He then tells them these words. "They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know," so this is a private moment, "for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." And then verse 32, "But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him." So Jesus, in His position of very clear authority and very clear power, the one who has called them, the one who has sent them out, the one who has taught them and been in their presence, the one who has performed great miracles, He now teaches them privately that He is about to give Himself over to everything they considered to be their enemies. He says that He's going to be killed and then on the third day rise again from the dead. But instead of actually asking Him, "Hey, can we grab a coffee for a second? What did you just say? How are we to understand?" So they didn't ask Him. What do they do? They imagine it in their minds and see it as, "Hold up a second. If Jesus is out of the picture, because it just sounds like He just told us He's going to be, which one of us gets to have the position?"

Again, isn't it funny how many times, if you're a believer, you've said to yourself, "Man, wouldn't it be great to have Jesus in the place, to have walked beside Him? What is that like?" If we get to see it, it doesn't automatically mean you're hearing or understand. Seeing the disciples receive the teaching that Jesus is about to die and be raised to life, and the fact that they're afraid to ask Him, afraid to ask Jesus, and yet they end up in an argument as they're walking along the path. And they're saying, "Hey, who gets the place?" And Jesus questions them and says, "Hey, what are you guys talking about?"

Now, that's a fun moment between a parent and child, isn't it? When you hear, and you know what your kids are talking about. And you show up in the room and say, "What did you guys say?" And so now that they understand that He understands what they have just said, He takes the opportunity to say, "Hey, listen. You're worried about position. I've just taught you that my position is going to be one of death and resurrection, and you're arguing who's going to take the position and the role of power." The contrast is clear. Positional authority taught through Jesus, prepared for them by the story of His going to the cross at whose hands He will go to the cross, He says, "Hey, listen. It's about lowliness. It's about being a servant. It's about being a slave to all. You want power? How much are you willing to give it away for the sake of another? How much are you willing to give up your personal access, your personal collection of power and authority to give it up for the sake that another might be elevated?" This is what Jesus is pointing to with regard to personal authority.

But then it goes quickly into relational authority because it doesn't just stop at Jesus teaching some discrete lines of text about top ten things to do to be a great leader. We can't reduce Jesus to that. That's not what He's doing. He will not allow it merely to be reduced to a didactic interaction between what they need to understand, the gap in their understanding, "Here are the top three things you need to do to be a better leader." No. He decides to bring in a narrative, a narrative that is at the heart of their culture. And so He's doing what Emily Dickinson once wrote in her famous poem, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." He's not coming at them first and foremost with a nice little discrete reduced to-do item. He brings up the story of a child.

Emily Dickinson wrote in her poem, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant. Success and circuit lies too bright for our infirm Delight. The Truth's superb surprise as Lightning to the Children eased with explanation kind. The Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind," meaning if Jesus had revealed the truth in His full ability and authority to make it so naked to them, they would leave His presence blind. What He needed to do was He needed to show them a lightning strike that it might silence them. As Dickinson says, "As Lightning to the Children eased with explanation kind. The Truth must dazzle gradually." And so what does Jesus do? He lets truth dazzle through the life of a child.

And here is what He says about relational authority, meaning who and how do you receive others, this is a way of understanding how you relate to authority and how you relate your authority to others. And here is what He says. Again, let's look at it. He says, "He sat down, and he called the twelve." Now, the reason why I emphasize that in my first reading is the word "called" there isn't just, "Hey, come over here for a second." This is a formal use of a word that Jesus is saying, "Pay attention. What I'm about to share with you is of greatest importance." Calls them. This is a report back to base moment. This is, sit down, sit up straight, and listen. And He says this, "'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.' And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.'"

So Jesus uses the life of a child as a way to invite the disciples to see exactly in the heart of their culture what He's talking about with regard to the use of a relational authority because a child would've been the lowest among the low in this culture. They would've not necessarily been given place or called on their name, and certainly wouldn't have wanted to be heard from. They would've been seen as dependent people under someone else, not someone who should be brought to the center. And Jesus says, "If you want to have great relational authority, my question is to you, who are you receiving? And then who are you receiving and how are you using it?" And here's what Jesus does. Instead of asking the question nakedly as I am, He takes the child, and He receives the child. The word "reception" isn't just saying, "Hey, come over here. I'd like to give you something." No. This idea of relational authority and receiving another is as follows. It means to welcome, to embrace, to name, to know them, to listen, to make room. And so He takes that person, this child, takes the child into His arms, and shows us what relational authority is about.

I don't know what authority you have or power that you exercise. You do. How are you using your authority and your power to welcome, to name, to listen, to know, to respect, to make room? Or is your use of relational authority something you use defensively? That when you feel it is something that is threatened, not honored, not respected or seen, you feel the knee-jerk reaction and intuitive desire to make sure that that doesn't happen again and whoever threatens it will know not to do it again?

To listen again to Jesus though, in receiving this child, He doesn't just show us what He says about receiving the lowly or the cast-off or the ones no one makes room for. Yes, He does that, but He does something more. Listen to what He says again. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. Now, in some sense, Jesus is saying, "If you're using your relational authority and power to make room for the lowest of these, you're making room for me because as you do to one of these, you do unto me."

But I believe there's yet another level of something that Jesus is teaching about His relational authority when He says the following. "Whoever receives me receives not me, but he who sent me." He isn't saying that He is a child, but He is saying that as the Son of God, that in going to give Himself over to death that we might receive the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of relationship with God our Father, that He is going to be considered even lower than a child, even lower than a slave, even lower than the lowly by allowing Himself to be put to death by His enemies so that on the third day, He might rise again to power and show Himself as great not just because He is great but because of how He has humbled Himself. And in receiving the humility of Jesus's person, of His work, it's showing us something about Jesus's relationship to the Father, "Not my will but your will be done." He's showing His relational authority with regard to being in relationship to us. The disciples have been arguing who gets to be the greatest, and Jesus is saying, "I have come to give my life away." They're arguing. He's showing.

And Jesus, with the authority and power that He has clothed within His person, could have done

something more powerful than strike of lightning to wake His disciples up. But even in how He's teaching them about their lack of humility, He shows humility. Thanks be to God. That even perhaps as the Spirit is demonstrating to you and to me how and in what ways we have sinned against Jesus and sinned against others because we sought to use our authority defensively and only for our good, even in the midst of that, God is good and loving and kind because even this very moment, the king of heaven and earth is mediating for you, who is seated at the righthand of God the Father almighty is praying for you. He's not pounding us, lightning us, pouring out His wrath on us because of our hard and dull hearts and, when we're honest, our white-knuckled grasp on our taste of authority and power. And yet He comes to us with wounds and all as the Son of the living God and says, "This day, Columbia Presbyterian Church, I've come to show you the way of humility by setting a table for you. Come and eat. Come and drink, sinner, saint, broken, and defensive in your use of power. I invite you to this place where my power was most demonstrated by giving up myself for you."

This is the heart of the gospel. This is what would motivate Augustine to say, "The first, the second, and the third ways of God is humility." But not just positional authority and relational authority. It is also kingdom authority, how Jesus lives out both in establishing His kingdom.

Jesus has all authority. He has all the power. He has the positional authority. He has the relational authority. But in establishing His kingdom, He shows us that He takes the world's definition and exercise of authority and turns it upside down in the establishment of His kingdom. So in establishing the ways and the works of Jesus is from first to last marked by humble service. Consider where we've been since December 25th, the incarnation and the remembering and preparing and the celebrating of Maundy Thursday where this meal was established, Good Friday where Jesus would go and pour out His blood for our salvation, and at Easter Sunday in which we are still in Easter season where He would be raised from death to life, that in all of it, Jesus is marked by humble service. The establishment of His kingdom can be seen through the lens of humility.

These are not just my words. These are also the reflection and the conclusions of one of the great theologians John Calvin when he would write these words. In speaking of Jesus's incarnation, he says,

"It was his task from the incarnation to swallow up death. Who but the life could do this? It was his task to conquer sin. But who but very righteousness could do this? It was his task to root out the powers of world and air. But who but the power higher than the world and air could do this? Now where does life or righteousness or lordship or authority of heaven lie but with God alone? Therefore, our most merciful God when He willed that we would be redeemed made Himself our redeemer in the person of his only begotten Son."

What marks even the entrance into the kingdom of Jesus requires of us humility because when we begin to really see Jesus even in the establishment of the incarnation, His death and His resurrection, requires of us to say, Lord, forgive me, a sinner. I long for power. I want to find my meaning, value, and worth in authority and power and influence. But more for me, Lord, than for you. I get angry, petulant, and defensive when I feel my authority and power tested or cut upon or short-circuited. I have a pity party when I feel that others didn't recognize my value and worth and my authority and my influence when my name was not listed among those to thank, when my name was not remembered when I was involved on the team and we authored this great work. Lord, I confess to you at the deepest resources of even being a parent, I most want to be honored and respected for my authority as a parent more than I do a lot of other positions of power. Lord, forgive me for the pettiness of my understanding of positional and relational authority for I have failed to see yet again. But thanks be to God even in your humility, Lord,

you remind me that even in the establishment of your kingdom, it begins and ends with humility. And that begins with me. Lord, forgive me.

But as Calvin reflects not only on the incarnation, we have others who reflect even on the words of Jesus in these words, again from Augustine. Normally, I use this at the time of Christmas season, but it bears repeating here. Augustine writes,

"Man's maker was made man that he, ruler of the stars, might nurse at his mother's breast, that the bread might hunger, that the fountain thirst, the light sleep, the way be tired on his journey, that the truth might be accused of false witness, the teacher be beaten with whips, the foundation be suspended on wood, that strength might grow weak, that the healer might be wounded, that life might die."

This is the glory and the beauty of kingdom authority in Jesus. And He invites us in this morning to experience a redeemer and a redemption that means to remake our use and understanding of authority and power.

Paul Tripp, counsellor and writer, says, "Jesus reminds the disciples that they haven't been called to lordship but to servanthood." Whether in marriage, whether in parenthood, whether at work or at play, whether young or old, the invitation is the same. Whether individually or corporately, how do we understand the gift of authority, influence, and power?

The greatest danger to the church and the world is not the world but when the church seeks to live its life through the ways of the world. The questions of who is boss, who gets in, and who stays out is an anathema to the life of the Christian and the life of the church. In our witness, it's not first and foremost about the use of hammer and nail to make our doctrine and our orthodoxy oh so glorious, and how dare you threaten it? But it is most seen and demonstrated by making space to the least of these and giving a glass of water and a meal to the hungry and clothing to the naked. It is most demonstrated when we turn to one another and are called to serve the one through being a servant of each other.

A marriage is most beautiful when we're less concerned about who gets to make the decisions and who has the authority. That's an anathema. But we submit unto one another as unto the Lord, husbands and wives. It isn't the question for the Christian or for the Christian marriage or for the Christian church "How do we get to exercise the positions of Christ of prophet, priest, and king?" No. I suggest that is an anathema to the gospel. The first and foremost question which defines our life as individuals, as marriages, as singles, as workers, as parents, as the church, the single biggest question is how, Lord Jesus, through my service to someone else can I make your love on display? Show me today, Lord Jesus, where I need to listen to make room, to embrace, and to know.

For as Jesus said in His own words to His disciples and He says to us, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom to many." And in our great wealth, may we never keep it for ourselves but give it away. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, you are good, and your love and faithfulness to us is eternal. Lord, forgive us for our defensive understanding of authority and power and influence. Lord, forgive us when we want to make room for ourselves and not for the lowly. Forgive us, Lord, when we're more caught up with who is boss and not where can I give myself away to another. But Lord, we come to you this morning, and we find you not holding us guilty or shaming us. We come again to the foot of the cross where we see our loving, gracious, forgiving redeemer inviting us in again. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your grace and mercy to us. Now help us, O Lord, as those who are made rich through the poverty of Jesus, be ready to give it away that we might demonstrate your love. It is in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.