

102024 English Sermon "Greatness in the Kingdom of God" Mark 10:35-45

It's often said that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Does power itself corrupt? Or are corrupt people drawn to power?

Throughout history, we see examples where people, when given power, tend to abuse it. The allure of control, prestige, or influence can blind them to moral and ethical responsibilities. This is true not just for political power but for all kinds—whether it's knowledge, popularity, wealth, or even influence over others.

I entered Methodist Theological University in South Korea as an undergraduate student 30 years ago and there was a time when I struggled with similar questions and challenges. As I've said a while ago, there was a strike in the second semester of my first year at the seminary where all the students had to repeat a semester due to insufficient class days. It was also a political battle between conservatives and progressives (between revivalist pastors and liberal theology professors), and of course power and corruption were not left out.

Many students gave up their seminary courses midway. They were disappointed by the political collusion and corruption of pastors and church leaders. As I watched the power and corruption of spiritual leaders, I was so busy pointing fingers at them that I couldn't take a good look at myself. When I finished my first semester of my third year and enlisted in the military, I prayed to God, "If God does not show me that he is alive, I will not return to seminary after my discharge."

Reading today's passage, Mark 10:35 and following, raises the question: What does it mean to be great? How do we measure greatness in our lives? How should we understand power as Christians? The disciples of Jesus, like many of us, were drawn to positions of honor and influence. James and John

boldly ask to sit at the right and left of Jesus in his glory, positions where they can exercise power in the kingdom they imagine.

But Jesus uses this moment to completely redefine what it means to be great in the kingdom of God. Greatness is not about position or power. It's about service, humility, and even sacrifice. This message is not new. It is a theme that appears throughout the Gospel of Mark and is consistent with what Jesus taught his disciples in Mark 9:30-37, where he again emphasized humility and service.

James and John, two of Jesus' closest disciples, boldly ask for places of honor in his coming kingdom. This desire for recognition is something we can all relate to. Whether in our jobs, relationships, or even in the church, we can be tempted to seek status and recognition. But Jesus challenged this mindset in Mark 9:33-34 when he overheard his disciples arguing about who was the greatest. Even then, they were preoccupied with questions of rank and honor. In both passages, Jesus sees this desire for greatness and responds with a radical call to humility.

In Mark 10, Jesus asks James and John, "Can you drink the **cup** I drink or be baptized with the **baptism** I am baptized with?" Here, He's referring to His upcoming suffering and death. Do you remember what Jesus prayed fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane before he was arrested? He prayed "Let this cup pass from me. But not my will, but your will be done." Here again, what the cup symbolizes is the suffering that he will undergo.

John Wesley taught that the Christian life is marked by a willingness to take up the cross daily. This means that we are called not just to admire Christ but to follow Him, even when the path leads to suffering. The cup Jesus speaks of is not just a metaphor for suffering; it is a tangible expression of sacrificial love.

The act of baptism also signifies our participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. When he died and was buried, we went down into the water of baptism symbolically. When he rose from the dead, we came out of the water renewed by the power of his resurrection. James and John did not fully understand what they were seeking. They wanted glory, but they did not yet understand that true greatness comes through sacrifice.

Similarly, in Mark 9:35, after hearing His disciples argue about who is the greatest, Jesus sits them down and says, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." He then takes a child in His arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me." In both cases, Jesus made it clear that greatness in His kingdom is not about climbing to the top, but about humbly lowering oneself, as He did.

And the really funny part of today's scripture is in verse 41, "When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John." When the other ten disciples heard James and John's request, they all became angry. Perhaps this is a sign that they too wanted a position of power. We are not talking about any worldly group here, but all twelve disciples of Jesus. But Jesus takes this opportunity to teach them a profound truth. According to Jesus, true greatness is not in dominating others. It is not in being the boss of others. It is in serving others. This is what He taught them in Mark 9. The least in the kingdom is the greatest. The servant is the leader. From a Christian perspective, this struggle with power is often rooted in human pride and the temptation to put oneself above others, forgetting the call to humility, service, and love.

Jesus himself is the ultimate example: "Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the ultimate acts of service, through which we are redeemed and restored to a right relationship with God. But this

redemption is not just for our personal benefit; it calls us to a life of service in the world, to be Christ's hands and feet, serving others and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

So, what kind of response did I receive from God when I enlisted in the army? Long story short, in John 21, the words that were given to Peter, "Follow me." No matter what others do, do not make excuses for others, and follow Jesus. And although I cannot tell you all the details right now due to time constraints, I am now standing before you as your pastor, testifying to you that God lives, because He has shown me so many signs that God is alive and God is able! We will have a chance to talk more about what happened there later.

The hymn "Are Ye Able?" reflects this call to servanthood and sacrifice. It asks a profound question that echoes Jesus' challenge to James and John: "Are ye able," said the Master, "to be crucified with me?" Jesus asked James and John if they could drink the cup of suffering, and this hymn asks the same of us. Are we willing to follow Jesus on the path of servanthood, even when it requires sacrifice? Are we ready to set aside our own ambitions for the sake of others? The response of this hymn captures the essence of what it means to follow Jesus: "Lord, we are able. Our spirits are Thine. Remold them, make us, like Thee, divine."

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, let us commit ourselves to the greatness that Jesus calls us to: a greatness rooted in love, service, and humility. May we be willing to drink the cup of sacrifice, following in the footsteps of our Lord, who came not to be served but to serve. Fairfield Grace, may God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you, your family, your business, your studies, and with the lives of your children. To Christ be thanks and praise. Amen.