

**Sermon for Sunday, February 12, 2012**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Jesus' Plan for Life**  
**Mark 10:32-45**

*32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. 33 "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."*

*35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." 36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. 37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." 38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" 39 "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."*

*41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

### **Our simple plans**

Most of us are reluctant to serve. We serve eventually if necessary, if it's a habit or a duty, but we'd prefer that work go away, without effort, and that beauty and honor come to us, without effort. Consider the afterglow of a family feast. Satisfied by tasty dishes, cheered by laughter and conversation, we gaze at the table. We realize, vaguely, that the kitchen is a mess. But the idea that I should do something is a wispy vapor. We think, "The children should do it." The phone rings and we pick it up, hoping that excuses us. We avoid work if we can, but if we must work, we hope to get full credit for it.

I put off projects around the house until they become embarrassing. After I take our drills and hammers and fixing a sagging shelf or dangling doorknob, I expect my wife to throw her arms around me, swooning and proclaiming, "My hero!" So it goes. The disciples are no different. In Mark 10, we see that they are slow to serve and eager for honor. Jesus' word to them is a word to us as well.

At the end, Jesus declares, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). When Jesus gave his life as a ransom it was an act of supreme service. He knew no one would throw their arms around him and call him a hero in that hour.

In Mark 10 Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem with his disciples. The topic of service and honor came up several times. For example, a young man approached Jesus asking what he could do to inherit eternal life? What laws should he keep? What great thing could he accomplish, so that when he completed it he would gain eternal life as his reward? He would do whatever Jesus asked. Yet when Jesus proposed that he sell all and give it to the poor, he balked, for he had great wealth and he loved that wealth more than he loved God (10:17-22).

Jesus says it's hard "for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God" (10:24). Money was his idol and everyone must dethrone his idols in order to enter the kingdom. The challenge is that God *does reward* his people. Jesus said that he will reward his disciple "a hundred times" for their sacrifice (10:29), that the twelve will "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28).

Notice the danger: those who work hard and sacrifice can be impressed by their sacrifice and begin to think God now owes them. Jesus says he will reward every sacrifice. God sees everything we do. It's good to know we never labor in vain when we work for God (1 Cor 15:58). Yet, Jesus says, there is a danger in serving *for the sake of the reward* (10:31). If we serve for the reward, what do we love – God or rewards? Bernard of Clairvaux said that if we demand a reward to obey God, we love the reward rather than God. "The soul that loves God seeks no other reward than that God whom it loves. Were the soul to demand anything else, then it would certainly love that other thing and not God."<sup>1</sup> When we serve for the reward, love recedes as a motive. Then, even if we were the first to serve the Lord, we may find that we are "last" in God's kingdom, because our love for him has faded (10:31).

Whenever we do something good, there is the chance of a reward. But we err if we hope God will repay every good deed. Jesus knows we want to give the minimum and get the maximum. To deliver us from this, he does two things. First, he gives his life to free us from the power of sin and self interest. Second, he teaches us how to live correctly, by his words and by his example.

### **1. Jesus' plan – the journey to Jerusalem (10:32-34)**

From the start, Jesus said he would save his people from their sins (Matt 1:25). From the start, Jesus knew how this would happen. He would suffer persecution even to the point of death. That is the fate of a prophet (5:10-12, Luke 13:33).

Because he knew this, Jesus prepared his disciples for it. But they loved him, they couldn't take it in. Now as they go to Jerusalem for the last time, he again tells them what's coming. Earlier, he said he must "suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again (Mark 8:38). Now Jesus tells his disciples that when he arrives he will be betrayed, condemned, mocked, flogged and killed, then raised to life three days later (10:33-34).

It happened just as he said. The religious leaders, filled with jealousy and self-righteous anger toward this pretentious prophet, arrested Jesus and finally killed him by crucifixion. That killed Jesus' body, yet he did not simply die. His disciples buried his body, yet by God's power, he arose again, physically, breaking through the tomb, for death cannot hold him (Acts 4:12).

Jesus knew all this, in two ways. He knew the hearts of men. He saw that they envied his popularity, that their opposition made them suspect his every move. He knew that the priests and Pharisees feared his power and thought he might lead the nation to follow him. So they wanted to put him to death.

More, Jesus knew he would die because it was God's set plan. It was the goal of his incarnation. As Jesus was going to Jerusalem, he took the twelve aside and "told them what was going to happen to him" (10:32). Yet God used acts of cruel injustice to accomplish our salvation. Jesus, the one innocent man, suffered death - not for himself but in our place, for our sins.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard, On Loving God 7.17

## 2. The disciples plan to bask in glory with Jesus (10:35-40)

Shortly after the disciples hear Jesus describe the plan, "James and John... came to him" with a request: "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory" in the Kingdom (10:37). This is quite a request. To sit at the right and left of Jesus' throne, is to seek honor and power.

Remember, Jesus just said he must go to the cross, but the disciples think of power and honor in his kingdom. They practically say, "We have no interest in suffering and death, so can we return to what you were saying about rewards?" The question is disappointing, but it grows from their faith. True, James and John think of their glory, not the cross. The question about sitting beside Jesus in his glory is selfish, but it's a *believer's* question; they believe Jesus will reign.

We are similar. The hope for honor isn't evil. The Lord crowned humans with honor when he created us in his image. But we're not content with honor. We want supreme honors. We want to be in charge. If not that, then we want to whisper in leader's ears and tell them what to do. So it is for James and John and for us.

The desire for honor can be healthy. Parents like to hear their children say, "You're a great Daddy, you're a great Mommy." At certain ages, they declare, "You're the best Daddy, best Mommy in the whole world." If they have surpassed the twelfth year, if they have obtained "critical distance" from their parents when they say this, then we've heard something powerful.

The same holds in other arenas. God created mankind with intrinsic dignity. No one wants to be judged a fool; no one wants to be the weak link. But should we want the highest rank? Should parents tell themselves, "Indeed I am the best father in the world"?

In our work, in our social life, we rightly want to be respectable. Beyond that, if God has given us skill in sales, design or finance, mechanics or teaching, music or sports, we should aspire to be the best we can be, within the limits of the time and our other duties. We should aim to grow, to make the most of our talents. A few have supreme talents and opportunities, so we should aspire to greatness. Most of us should aim to be *as good as possible*. We should try to be the best we can be, as long as it fits in the context of service to God and others.

James and John had not learned this, so Jesus instructed them. He declares, "You don't know what you are asking" (10:38). They don't know what Jesus knows: greatness comes with great costs. Great skill or power brings responsibility to use them well.

- High position brings hard decisions, great labor, even great suffering.
- To be center of attention is to face close scrutiny. "The center sounds attractive, but the center is the focus of many hopes and needs. Their hopes can be contradictory. To please one is to disappoint another.
- Above all, to share in Christ's glory, one must share in his suffering. There is no glory, in Jesus' kingdom, without the cross.

The same principle holds throughout life. Many wish for great wealth, great power, or great skill. But to ask for these things is also to ask for anxiety from the inside, for envy from outside, and for all the burdens of stewardship.

Do James and John know this cost? Jesus says, "You don't know what you are asking" (10:38). Jesus' greatness will come through his suffering. If they would share his glory, he must ask them, "Can you drink the cup I drink (10:38b)?" The cup signifies suffering, even wrath and retribution, in the Old Testament.

In Gethsemane, Jesus asked the Father if "this cup" of suffering could pass him by. The cup is God's wrath which Jesus endured on our behalf on the cross. Can they "drink the cup?" They reply, "We can." Yet, when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, they ran away to avoid the cup.

Later they did drink, in a way. James was among the first martyrs (Acts 12:1-2). John endured exile on slave colony of Patmos (Rev 1:9). But at the moment, Jesus lets their ignorance stand. Let's pause to see a life principle: Sometimes Jesus lets ignorance go. He says nothing until people are ready to hear. He knows how to keep silent and he knows how to repeat himself. So should we.

So James and John will drink, but, Jesus says, "To sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. The Father gives places to those whom he has prepared" (10:40).

### 3. Jesus' plan contrasts with secular perspectives 10:41-44)

When the other ten disciples overheard this, "they became indignant" (10:41). They apparently had the same hopes but James and John had asked first. The disciples had squabbled about honor before and they would squabble again.

Jesus called everyone together to address the problem. He compared two ways of life, the way of Gentiles and his way. "You know that those considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them" (10:42). This is a simple fact: in his day, rulers ruled. People measured greatness by the number of servants, even slaves, one possessed. This is simple fact.

Things change over the centuries, yet they remain the same. We still ask who has authority, who has power? We still judge success: Where is she on the organization chart? Who reports to her? Who listens to him? Who takes his orders? Others judge success by the amount of the leisure. For the ancients, servants and slaves covered both fronts.

This is the way of the world. But Jesus says, "Not so with you" (10:43). The next three lines are a form of Hebrew poetry called climactic parallelism.

Whoever wants to become **great** among you must be your **servant**... And

Whoever wants to be **first** must be your **slave** — Just as...

The **Son of Man** did not come to be served, but to serve, and... to **give his life as a ransom** for many (10:43-45).

In the kingdom, the higher the leader, the humbler the service. Again, the "great" are servants, but the "first" (leaders) are slaves. And the greatest of all, the Son of Man, takes the lowest position, by giving up his very life. So then, in the kingdom, the higher the rank, the harder the service. That is Jesus' path to greatness; he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

#### 4. Jesus is our ransom and our example (10:45)

There are two aspects to Jesus' declaration. The first declares his unique work. When Jesus says he "came to serve," he points to his pre-existence. Before Jesus came here, he was somewhere else. He came here to accomplish something, a God-given mission. He came "to call... sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). He came "to seek and to save what was lost" (19:10). He "came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim 1:15).

Jesus came to "give his life as a ransom for many." A ransom is a purchase price, paid to obtain the release of a captive. In antiquity, a king might pay a ransom to set free a general who was captured in battle. A commoner might pay a price to set a slave free. These concepts, are metaphors that point to something deeper: Jesus offered himself - not money - to deliver us from bondage to sin, its power, and its consequences.

God acted as redeemer, delivering his people from captivity in Egypt. He said: "I am the LORD, and I will deliver you from slavery... and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God" (Exod 6:6-7). Psalm 130:8 says the Lord "will redeem Israel from all their sins."

Jesus introduces the ransom concept with a question: "What can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt 16:26). Answer: "A man can give nothing." But Jesus, the God-man, now promises that he will "give his life as a ransom." That is what he does on the cross. Not with gold or silver. God doesn't pay anyone anything. No man, no fallen angel, can own a person so that Jesus has to pay them. Peter says, "It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pet 1:18-19).

Ransom is an aspect of the work of Christ when he offered himself to atone for our sins. Yet "ransom" elicits specific aspects of Jesus' work.

First, Jesus compares our sinful habits to slavery or captivity. We can't extricate ourselves or liberate ourselves from our predicament. We need an outside intervention. Jesus secures our release from sin, its power, and its consequences, including guilt, condemnation and death, physical and eternal.

This is our status spiritually and morally. I started playing tennis in my twenties and never took lessons. Picking up concepts from friends who played in college I came away with some flawed habits. Twenty years later I had my first lesson. Coach tells me, "Your backhand grip isn't quite right... and you've been doing it the wrong way so long, you'll never change." So I'm in bondage to my bad habit. I am (probably) unable to extricate myself. Unless I quit my day job, I don't have the time or capacity to change. Far more than this, we are in bondage to sin.

Second, a price is paid. The payment is not a monetary, but it is a sacrifice. We say people "pay a price" to get into medical school or to start a business. The price Jesus paid is far greater than these - his "precious blood."

Third, we belong to a new master. Jesus "obtained" or "acquired" us. We "were bought with a price" (Acts 20:28, 1 Cor 6:20, 7:23). By paying this price, Jesus liberates us from sin's power. Whatever our circumstances in this world, we are never *spiritual* slaves. We are free – yet not absolutely free. We belong to the Lord. He liberated us from an evil master, but placed us in his household, where we offer noble service.

### **The object of the ransom**

Jesus pays that price "for many." In Jesus' day, "the many" meant the people or children of God. This use of the term is grounded in Isaiah 53:10. Speaking of Jesus as God's suffering servant, God spoke through Isaiah saying, "My righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities." Romans 5:12-17 says the same thing. Through the sin of Adam, Paul declares, many died. But now the death of Jesus brings life and justification to many – all who believe.

Jesus came to teach, heal and reveal the Father. Above all, he came to deliver us from the grip of sin and Satan. He came to drain the cup of wrath for sin. But we need to recognize that we can't drain the cup. Jesus must drink it to the end for us.

### **The imitation of Christ**

This act of Jesus is unique, unrepeatable. Yet Jesus says we should serve "just as" the Son of Man came to serve. So Jesus' work is unique, but his life is a pattern. Jesus often says this. Jesus washed his disciples' feet, then said we should "wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Jesus says we must serve others as he served us.

It is so easy to be abstract, to say, "I want to serve" while we do nothing. Jesus acted. He fed the hungry, healed the sick and atoned for sin. So let's act. At home, clear the table, take things off the floor and put them away quietly, without telling anyone. If a job needs to be done, find a way to do it.

Don't hide behind a theology of *gifts*. If we don't want to take a turn in the kitchen or caring for children, we say, "Not my gift" or "I'm no good at that." Let's find ways to make our service and sacrifice as concrete as Jesus' service.

I saw this problem in myself. Once some youth workers invited me to speak at a junior high retreat. After college, I tried to work with a junior high youth group. It was a rough group. Fifteen kids came, several of them were criminals who came for one reason - to torment me. The memory was still fresh so it was too far from my comfort zone. When a speaker has doubts about an engagement, he may say, "I'll pray about it" or "I'll talk to my advisors." This means "no." But I didn't hesitate, I just said, "No." But the inviters were friends so they persisted:

"Your daughter [age twelve] can come for free." I replied, "That is of no interest to me, since I will not be attending."

They countered, "You can meet her friends and learn about kids at that age." Good point; I began to soften a little.

"Besides, the food is really good." That was a lie, and I told them so.

They said, "We'll get you an isolated cabin. You never need to come out except when you speak." That's appealing! They insisted I was the man and eventually I relented and it went pretty well. But it took a long time to get to "Yes, I'll serve."

Compare my attitude to Jesus. The cross is in no one's comfort zone. Yet Jesus came willingly, without the promise of a speaker's cabin. He came, knowing he would be mocked, scourged and crucified. He came to ransom us from our sins, including the sinful desire to avoid work whenever possible and to gain whatever reward is possible.

## **5. Our plans can look like the plans of Jesus**

The clarity of Jesus' purpose for his life should both move us and instruct us. For our plans can look like the plans of Jesus. We can't plan to give our lives as a ransom. Even if we should die for others, it would not be an atoning sacrifice. Jesus' death and resurrection is unique. Yet we can long to be like him and follow him by finding meaning in the number we serve, not the number serving us.

This can happen in two ways. We can seek God's purpose for our life, and if we find it, we can pursue it, whatever the price. It's not always easy to do this. As we saw last week, we're quick to think our desires are God's plans. James and John made the same mistake. We have to seek God's purposes humbly, together.

Second, as I read the gospel accounts of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, I notice that he did reach his goal, but the journey itself is an almost constant series of interruptions and apparently random questions, urgent problems to be solved. Jesus didn't try to answer every question, as asked, or to solve every problem. But he took on a lot of them. "Jesus help my son, if you can. Have pity on my daughter. Have mercy on me! Jesus, can you tell me...? Most of the time, he did have mercy and help, even as he kept his eye on the goal. So may we keep our eye on the goal, yet keep our ears open to the cry of help.

Let us hope, believe and follow Jesus as we do this. He came to give his life as a ransom for many, for us, that we might live in service, in love and freedom.