

HOW TO ACHIEVE GREATNESS

SERIES: GREAT TRUTHS RECONSIDERED

by Doug Goins

Seeing the title of this message, perhaps you are thinking, "I don't care about being great. I have no delusions of grandeur about anything. Why is this sermon for me?" But the subject of this message is really influence, or how to affect other people's lives. Every one of us cares about that to some degree. Whether or not we aspire to any sort of organizational leadership responsibility, we care about affecting the people we love-family members, people we work with, and so on. We care about being men and women of influence for Christ's sake in peoples' lives.

We're going to be studying Mark 10:35-45. Verses 43-45 give the climax of Jesus' teaching in this section: "...Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Greatness, leadership, and influence come from learning to serve people, to meet their legitimate needs.

Think about the beautiful downward mobility of Jesus from heaven to earth to the cross to the grave. Charles Wesley wrote in the hymn *And Can it Be?* about Jesus' self-emptying:

*"Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race!"*

The beautiful word of messianic promise in Isaiah 53 said that the suffering servant would have impact and influence because of his death on the cross (verse 12):

**"Therefore, I will allot him a portion with the great,
And He will divide the booty with the strong."**

Spiritual greatness and strength are available to all of us. And if we're honest, we would love to live that way. These verses from the Lord Jesus in Mark 10 define and illustrate not just spiritual strength but the greatness of servant leadership and godly influence in peoples' lives, and Jesus' teaching comes right out of his own life, which he lived for us.

Jesus' self-sacrificing focus on obedience

Let's read verses 32-34 for context. This is a discussion of the necessity of Jesus' death on the cross:

"And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking on ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were fearful. And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him, saying, 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.'"

This takes place about a week before the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus is walking up toward the city with the twelve and with a group of other followers behind them. They are going up for Passover that last week. Jesus is committed to going to the cross in obedience to his Father, and now that's right in front of him.

We're going to find immediately that the disciples' minds are on other things. Jesus is by himself, out ahead of them, and just in the way he is walking there is an adamant focus on where he is headed. Back in Mark 8:31-33 he told his disciples he was going to be killed and after three days rise again. Peter in effect grabbed him by the lapels and said, "We're not going to let

you die." Jesus had to say, "Get out of my way. That's a Satanic influence." The second time he told them about the necessity of his dying, they got distracted and began discussing who was going to be the greatest when he came into his kingdom (9:31-34). The issue of greatness is actually a running concern of the twelve in the last weeks of Jesus' life.

But they sense an approaching crisis. This whole picture in these verses is fraught with tension. What the disciples are fearful and amazed about and struggling with is this contradiction between a Messiah who the Old Testament promises will reign and be victorious, who will bring peace on earth, righteousness and justice; and a Messiah who other passages (e.g., Isaiah 53) say will be humiliated and must die.

Now Jesus for the third time calls the twelve to him to explain why he is so resolute. Like the suffering servant in Isaiah 50:7, "His face was set like a flint." He will not be dissuaded from his calling, and he knows exactly what lies in store. He will endure the cross.

In the middle of verses 33-34, where he summarizes his own passion, he adds three new details that he hasn't mentioned before: the public humiliation, their spitting on him publicly, and the savage scourging. How did Jesus know these things? Well, he didn't have some kind of special foresight. He was a student of the Scriptures-Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, other Old Testament predictive passages that he knew by heart. It was from that wealth of knowledge that he could explain to the disciples what lay ahead of him. Luke records the Lord as saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished" (Luke 18:31).

In this otherwise grim summary, he says in verse 34 that three days later he will rise again. That's the third time he has mentioned resurrection. Every time he has talked about his death, he has talked about his resurrection as a certainty. But the twelve don't seem to hear or understand how this all fits together.

Human focus on being in first place

Jesus is focusing very self-sacrificially on the cross. In contrast, look at the focus of two of the disciples, James and John, beginning in verse 35:

And James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Him, saying to Him, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You."

When my children were little, they used to say things like that: "Daddy will you do something for us?" One time when Laynie was in about second or third grade, she said, "Daddy, can I have six dollars?" I said okay. Then she said, "...And then would you take me for pizza?" Jesus answers wisely. Look at verse 36:

And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And they said to Him, "Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on Your left."

They step out from the twelve and come up to Jesus on their own. Matthew's gospel says that their mother is involved, that she pushes them forward and even speaks on their behalf. But what Mark makes clear is that these two men are not just being influenced by their doting mother. They really want this for themselves.

The way their request is phrased, "...We want You to do for us whatever we ask of You," suggests some uncertainty as to whether what they're asking is proper. There is a sense of awkwardness.

But there are specific things they are asking for. In verse 37, there are three important implications: first, they say they want to sit with Jesus. Sitting means rulership, thrones, or chairs of judgment. They want exaltation, honor, places of pre-eminence. When his kingdom is established, they want to be like the vice president and the secretary of state of the Cabinet, the number 1 and number 2 people in the circle of leadership. Somebody's got to fill those spots; it might as well be them. Second, they ask if they can sit on his right and his left, to be the two who are closest to Jesus, his intimates, his confidantes in kingdom affairs, the two Jesus can count on the most in ruling his kingdom. They want to be part of the inner circle, the most trusted men in leadership. And third, they want to share "in Your glory." In Matthew's account he says, "...in Your kingdom..." (20:21). But the word "glory" is very significant. It speaks of power, authority, and influence. Now, there's nothing wrong with any of these things. These two have experienced what it means to serve the Lord Jesus, to go in the power of the kingdom raising the dead, casting out demons, healing the sick. Those are good things that they have

tasted, and they want the full experience of them when Jesus brings the kingdom in. They want ultimate power and authority, to rule with Jesus in his messianic kingdom. They're really asking for influence, spiritual greatness, and leadership responsibility.

Implicit in the request, however, is an attempt to ace out the other ten. If James and John are number 1 and number 2, everybody else is numbers 3-12. They want to get there first with the most. The sad thing is that competition has set into what has been a wonderful circle of unity for three years. It is distorting the reality of what Jesus has taught, modeled, and tried so hard to help them understand through these years of traveling, living, and ministering together.

Mark 9:33-35 tells us,

"And they came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, 'What were you discussing on the way?' But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. And sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.'"

In Matthew 23:8, in another context, Jesus is talking about teaching authority. Rabbis in Jesus' day had little groups of loyal devotees, and so many budding theologians aspired to be teaching rabbis. Jesus says, "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers." The followers of Jesus are to be committed to equality and unity, not to vie for position or for special titles.

I'm so glad we're not big on titles here at PBC, that I'm not Pastor Doug. I'm your friend and brother. I've been given pastoral gifts, but that doesn't mean I deserve special titles. We have only one Teacher, and that's Jesus.

But here are James and John trying to elevate themselves above the other ten. And if we're honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge we are really no different. We all experience the same desire for position, attention, prestige, authority, and influence over other people. In the last two messages (Discovery Papers 4602, 4603) we were studying Ephesians 4 and Galatians 5-6 with Steve Zeisler. We saw the beautiful picture of the character that life in the body of Christ is supposed to have: unity, commitment to the good of the whole, servant leadership. "The church makes progress only as we all make progress together." Galatians 5-6 reminded us that we're to have no sense of superiority over people who struggle with sin in their lives. And we embrace this beautiful, supernatural reality, but we know our own hearts-how jealous, competitive, and self-aggrandizing (even in subtle ways) we can be in our desire for somebody to pay attention to us and give us credit for what we do or how we live.

When I got out of college I worked in the business world for a number of years, then in para-church ministry at Mount Hermon, and I've been on several church staffs. I've found the dynamic is true everywhere: there's always the struggle over "in groups" and outsiders. We all believe that in every organization there must be some inner circle, a wonderful, sublime group of people, the crème de la crème; and if we can somehow be a part of it, life will be terrific and we really will have influence in the organization. God will really be able to use us then.

A number of years ago a dear brother came to PBC for the first time as a visitor. He invited me to his house, and in the course of our conversation he said, "You know, in every organization there is a power structure, and I know there's an inner circle of leadership at PBC. I'm going to find out what it is and I'm going to be a part of it." Well, that was ten or so years ago. He's still around, and he's still serving, and he's finally realized that there are not hidden cliques of power. Nobody rides on titles, taking advantage of other people.

One of the things I've learned is to watch for when I start thinking in terms of "we" and "they," "we" being the superior, more spiritual group. Such language gives away this competitiveness, divisiveness, and jealousy that we see at work among the twelve. Even titles can be very divisive: pastor, elder, deacon, steering committees, executive committees, or whatever. There are Biblical titles, but they can be used to exercise authority without an understanding of the servant role that they represent.

God's sovereign choice of our place

Let's look at Jesus' response to James and John. It's wonderfully loving and patient. Mark 10:38-40:

But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with

the baptism with which I am baptized. "But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

In Matthew's account he adds the phrase, "...by my Father" (20:23). It is God the Father who is in charge of that, Jesus says.

Jesus doesn't rebuff or rebuke them. He is really telling them that they don't understand what is required in the process of developing a follower into a spiritual leader or a person of spiritual influence. He raises two familiar Old Testament symbols for them: the symbol of the cup and the symbol of baptism.

The question about being able to drink the cup would be evocative to these two men. It means, "Are you willing to drink everything that God brings you in life, the good things and the bad, the times of celebration and joy and the times of suffering and struggle and trial and difficulty? Are you willing to drink the cup from God's hand in obedience, whether it's a cup of blessing or a cup of wrath (God's judgment)?" Jesus is looking at crucifixion. Remember, in the Garden of Gethsemane he will pray, "Abba! Father! Remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt." (Mark 14:36) He is submissive to what lies before him.

Baptism is a picture of being totally submerged, overwhelmed by water. The Old Testament Jews were afraid of the ocean, not being seafaring people. Death by drowning was the worst kind of death. So the idea of being totally overwhelmed and submerged was terrifying. Jesus says, "Are you willing to be baptized with the same kind of baptism that faces me?" He is speaking of his death and burial underground in this sense.

They respond with amazing self-confidence: "We are able. Of course we can. We can handle anything." They're saying they've got what it takes, but they don't really know what they're asking for. It's tremendously impetuous. It's youthful zeal. Jesus doesn't try to explain it any further. It will not be until after his death and resurrection, at Pentecost, that it starts to make full sense to them.

We can be just as impetuous and overly ambitious for leadership. We often think we're ready for things we're not ready for. Are we willing to wait, to trust God to put us where he wants us?

But Jesus does take them at their word in the middle of verse 39: "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized." They will suffer, he knows. James was the first of the apostles to be executed by Herod. John was the last to die. We don't know how he died, but he suffered exile on the island of Patmos. Church tradition says he was boiled in oil during Nero's reign.

Jesus continues in verse 40, "But to sit on My right or on My left [to have position, influence, authority], this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared. This is my Father's responsibility. I don't have authority over that." If you look carefully at that last phrase, "...It is for those for whom it has been prepared," Jesus doesn't say that we can prepare ourselves for it, that we can get ourselves disciplined or trained. God is the one who places us where he wants us. Positions of leadership will be prepared for the individuals of God's choosing, not the other way around. They aren't available merely on request.

Jesus doesn't answer the original question that James and John ask. He focuses on the process of getting to a place of influence and leadership, and it's the way of the cross. Are we willing to be totally obedient and submissive to God the Father no matter what he brings us? Are we willing to live under it no matter how difficult it is?

Righteous indignation unmasked

In verse 41 there's a humorous interruption:

And hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.

Jesus is looking at the cross, James and John are looking at a chance for position, and the other ten are watching James and John outsmart them, and it makes them angry. I don't think their indignation is in the least bit righteous. It's resentful and jealous, because, again, if James and John are number 1 and number 2, then they're numbers 3-12, and they see that very clearly.

It's amazing to me how often, when I slow down and examine my own righteous indignation, it is really self-righteous resentment about what somebody else has, a position or influence, that I don't have. Again, I think about my children when they were little. They would tattle on one another: "Daddy, he should not have this," which really meant, "I wish I had gotten it first." Many times when we holler about things not being fair or not working out as they should, we ought to examine our own hearts. Are we willing to accept what God offers us and what he has given to others? Or are we challenging his

authority?

Greatness is a commitment to last place

What Jesus does in verses 42-45 is contrast worldly authority and influence with kingdom authority and influence in the body of Christ. He says in verse 42 that the world system doesn't work in God's kingdom. Again, he doesn't lecture. He folds them into his loving direction. "Come on, guys, let me explain it to you one more time." Verses 42-43a:

And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you...."

The disciples, just as we do today, by and large have the wrong frame of reference in defining authority. They look at Roman generals, wealthy slave owners, and government officials who are pagans or non-believers. To the disciples, power, authority, and influence are represented by the number of people under these authorities and the financial responsibility they carry. I don't think at all that Jesus is criticizing the world system. He's simply recognizing that this is how the world functions, whether it's in business or the military or in any number of other organizational structures. We see this way of thinking today in regard to the size of our salary and benefits, the title we have, where we fit in the organizational chart, how many people jump when we speak. Simply put, Jesus is saying that a worldly view of leadership requires authority to be exercised over other people from the top down. It is chain-of-command everywhere we look.

But he says it's not to be that way among us in his kingdom. Look at verses 43b-45. He's going to make the point that influence and authority grow out of servanthood, slavery, and a commitment to last place.

"...But whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Greatness, leadership, and influence grow out of servanthood, not out of organizational appointment. God's kingdom is different. Servitude isn't a very popular word today. It's not a management model, at least in our valley. But when we commit ourselves to meeting somebody else's spiritual need, something remarkable happens. There is an authority established. There is a voluntary response of loving respect. That's how spiritual authority is always given. We honor leaders whom we've learned to respect and trust because they've served us, not because of their titles or their place in some organizational definition.

Think about leadership in your family. The fact that you have the title "father" or "mother" or "husband" or "wife" doesn't guarantee that there will be loving, submissive respect for who you are. If we are respected it's because we have demonstrated sacrificial, loving service to our families, not because we have paraded our title around and said, "I'm the dad, you do what I say." It's true in every setting.

There are great men we love with whom PBC is linked in ministry. Eli Fangidae is a giant among men in Indonesia, a church-planter, really an apostle in a sense. Azad Marshall is the Anglican bishop of the gulf states in Pakistan, and carries great leadership responsibility in the church there. Jaime Guerrero leads the prison ministry in Mexico. Those people have authority because they have served the brothers and sisters, not because of where they are in the organizational structure or their titles. They're servants of Christ who have poured their lives out, and people respond to them in trust and in respect.

We're called not just to servanthood but to slavery, it says in verse 44. The word means "bondslave," which is the strongest possible definition. A slave doesn't own himself. In the first century, a slave was like a piece of property, totally controlled by his owner. We are voluntary slaves of Jesus Christ. Do you see yourself that way? It's a choice we make, and we're called to make ourselves a slave of other people as well to meet their spiritual needs. We're to give up our rights to ourselves. This is hard. It's radical. It goes against the grain. We don't just give up the right to be the center of attention or to be number 1. We give up the right to even be equal with everyone else. The reality is, everybody else is more important than we are. We're called to lay down our right (or our perceived right, at least) to be appreciated, noticed, respected, served. That's what a slave does. In Luke 17:7-10, Jesus talks about how a slave goes out and works in the field all day, then comes in and prepares dinner for his master without expecting to be thanked. "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.'"

Finally, influence and authority grows out of a commitment to last place. There's a downward spiral from servanthood to slavery to death on a cross-downward mobility. It's *descending* into greatness, a commitment to last place. Remember Mark

9:35: "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all...." Jesus not only was a servant and a slave, but he gave up his very life because of my sin. He took my place, bore my sin on the cross, and made me free because of his choice to give up every conceivable right for my salvation. Jesus didn't parachute into the world and say, "Here I am. I'm the Son of God! Worship me, obey me, revere me." He was born in humility in a manger, he worked at a blue-collar job as a carpenter, and he had a relatively short period of public ministry. But he lived out this beautiful life of humility and servanthood, and then he went to the cross, saying to his Father, "...Not what I will, but what Thou wilt." Again, in Wesley's words, he "emptied Himself of all but love."

We're full of self, aren't we? It seems like too much to give up. Without Christ at work within us, it is a total impossibility. We don't have what it takes to be servants or slaves of one another.

The apostle Paul echoes the same call for us in the body: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus...." (Philippians 2:3-5.)

This doesn't come naturally to me. I was raised with a tremendous sense of identity and worth and value. I was one of those kids who was "too big for his britches." And it's been a long, hard process for me to wholeheartedly, gratefully accept this calling. I am so grateful that when I came to PBC more than 20 years ago, there was a generation of men and women who understood this and lived it out, modeled it. I learned it by watching them. They were brilliant people, outspoken, strong in the Scriptures, but they were willing to give up their rights in order to serve. It's been a tremendous legacy and heritage. Perhaps you've had similar experiences with people who have served you, who really have been slaves of Jesus in your life, willing to die to themselves for your growth.

The good news is, as awkward and unnatural as it feels, God is committed to making us servants, whether we really want to be or not, whether we even think we can be or not. Listen to Paul's encouraging prayer of benediction for the church in Thessalonica:

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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