

January 4, 2026

THE UPSIDE-DOWN NATURE OF THE KINGDOM

Mark 10:32-45

(3 of 15 in a series through Mark 10-16)

In his 1992 book *Rediscovering Holiness*, J. I. Packer tells the reader that he'd actually proposed another title for the book than the one the publisher ended up going with. He'd proposed that they title the book, *With Christ in the School of Holiness*, a deliberate echo of Andrew Murray's book, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. That may be the very reason the publisher didn't go that way, as Packer even admits that would be "almost a steal" of another book's title.<sup>1</sup> But the impulse Packer felt in thinking about holiness requiring serious learning, like being in school, makes good sense to me. The reason for this is because holy living oftentimes requires that which goes directly against the natural grain of our thinking. There are certain things that we seem to have an instinct about which, when compared with the teaching of the Bible, are found to be completely out of line. This is no doubt why a central component of the Great Commission requires us not simply *telling* one another to obey Christ but *teaching* one another to obey Christ. Because holiness can require us to live contrary to our instincts, we need, as Packer says it, to sit with Christ in the school of holiness. We need to put our noses in our Bibles and see what is required of us to say, think, and do to live holy lives. And if we think of the Bible as the curriculum in Christ's school for holiness, there may be no text in that curriculum that challenges our natural instincts and fleshly desires as much as the text we're looking at this morning—Mark 10:32-45. If we consider what Jesus says in this text, it almost feels like we need to turn our natural instincts completely upside down if we're going to understand what life in his kingdom looks like. I'll see if I can show you what I mean as we consider these verses.

The text begins with Mark painting a scene for us that actually isn't too familiar for us as we've been studying through Mark's gospel. Jesus and the disciples are walking on the road, going up to Jerusalem. That part isn't unusual or striking in any way. What's unexpected is we're told that Jesus was walking ahead of them, and the disciples are lagging behind, amazed and afraid. We're used to Jesus walking with his disciples, among them, teaching them, talking to them, and not out in front of them as they lag behind. And why are they amazed and afraid?

Well, Mark doesn't tell us why they're lagging behind or amazed or afraid, but we can imagine why. Just a couple chapters earlier, Peter had confessed to Jesus that he and the other disciples believed that Jesus was God's long-awaited Messiah. That is, they believed that Jesus was God's promised, eternal king who would come and make all things right, defeating his enemies and saving his people. Okay, so remember that. Now, consider that Jesus isn't simply wandering about from town to town. He's set his face to Jerusalem and is on his way there. In fact, by the time we begin chapter 11, he's arrived, as you'll note that the ESV provides a heading at the beginning of that chapter that reads: "The Triumphal Entry."

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<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 1992), 15.

So, in the minds of the disciples, a serious showdown between Jesus and the Roman authorities is about to take place. There can be no other conclusion in their minds considering who they believe Jesus is and what they believe the Messiah comes to do. It would be like someone arriving in Jackson that you believe is destined to take over the city, and then he announces, I'm heading to city hall. That gets everyone's eyes opened and hearts racing, doesn't it? That's what the disciples are thinking and seeing as Jesus heads toward Jerusalem.

It's almost like they're the group who walk in behind a heavyweight fighter as he marches toward the ring. And yet Rome isn't on the scale of most opponents. They're perhaps the greatest world power known in the history of the world to that point. So, it doesn't seem out of place for Jesus' disciples to find themselves lagging a little behind him to make sure he alone is in the lead and to feel amazed and frightened. All of that makes sense in light of how they understand the Messiah's mission—which would necessarily involve a showdown with Rome.

And yet, as that vision of an epic showdown is no doubt in their minds, Jesus once more tells them what is going to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise" (vv. 33-34). In other words, right out of the gate Jesus tells them that their thinking and instincts are wrong—which is the theme of this whole section. So, this brings us to our first seemingly upside-down truth, namely, that there is no crown without the cross.

### **There is no crown without the cross**

Here's what I mean. The disciples are right to expect the Messiah to conquer every single one of his enemies and save his people. That certainly will happen. Now, it won't happen until his return, but it will happen. Jesus will one day return, and his rule will be evident to all. He'll come as God's King to bring final judgment and salvation. But before that day comes, Jesus had to suffer, die, and rise. In other words, you don't get to that day of glory (that I've shorthand referring to as the "crown") without the cross. That's what Jesus is making unmistakably clear to his disciples here—for the third time!

As we've noted, the disciples would have had a hard time with Jesus being the Messiah and suffering as he's predicted. I mean, he's heading to Rome for what should seem like a showdown with his enemies, and he's telling his disciples that he'll be delivered over, condemned, mocked, spat on, flogged, and killed. It's hard to square that picture with one of a conquering king who'll destroy his enemies. I mean, this picture Jesus is giving them seems to be one of weakness instead of reigning with power, doesn't it? For a man to be mocked, spat on, flogged, and killed is a man who (one would guess) is powerless before his enemies. Otherwise, why let them do that to you?

And yet this is the point, Jesus will absolutely be *allowing* this. He isn't powerless. He could

destroy every enemy. He's being—to use Paul's words—*obedient* to the point of death, even death on a cross. In fact, this is one reason why Jesus so clearly predicts his suffering and death. It's much like when the prophets foretell of Israel's judgment at the hands of her enemies. One could think that God was powerless to protect his people if you just saw them conquered by their enemies. But because the prophets foretold it as God's judgment, everyone should have understood that no one was getting the upper hand on God. This was his work. And that's precisely why Jesus predicts his suffering and death, so that we might understand that this is his work. He will indeed reign, he's telling them, but he first chooses to suffer and die. He'll not bypass the crown on the way to the cross. That's the first seemingly upside-down expectation Jesus shares. It won't be the last, but it's necessary that we understand this truth in order to understand the next, which I'll show as we continue on in the story.

The trend we've seen so far in Mark's gospel is that after Jesus predicts his suffering and death, his disciples respond in the most prideful and self-absorbed ways you could imagine. On one occasion, Peter had the audacity to rebuke Jesus for saying he'd die, and on another the disciples argued about which one of them was the greatest. And just when you think they couldn't top that, they do. We're told in verse 35 that James and John come up to Jesus asking him to give them a blank check in the form of a commitment to do whatever they ask. But Jesus will not get trapped in necessarily fulfilling some odd request, so he just comes out and asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?" (v. 36). And they tell him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (v. 37).

Now, whatever confusion they have over his repeated claims of suffering and dying, they still seem to understand that Jesus is somehow about to establish his reign over his enemies. He's about to establish his kingdom. If they think of Jesus' prediction of resurrection as the general resurrection, maybe they're thinking, Jesus will suffer, die, and then God will raise all his people to reign. Again, I'm not quite sure how all of this is working in their minds. But they seem to think that we're about to see the kingdom of God come in all of its glory, and if indeed they're on the heels of that with Jesus heading toward Jerusalem, James and John want to take advantage of this and see if they can claim the spot of being Jesus' top chief advisors in overseeing his kingdom. And Jesus will ultimately not give them a satisfying answer, telling them that it's not his to grant such a role but that of his Father. But that's not where he begins his answer. He begins by showing them that there is no glory without suffering.

### **There is no glory without suffering**

Jesus' response to James and John's outlandish request is found in verse 38, as he says, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Now, what in the world does that mean?

Well, throughout the OT, the image of a cup is the image of suffering or judgment. Similarly, suffering is pictured in the OT as being overcome by the flood or deluge of water (e.g., Psalm

69:1-2), like baptism. And even when we are baptized, it symbolizes our having died with Christ. So, both of these images of the cup and baptism represent suffering and death.

Now, we know that Jesus will experience these realities. For him, the cup and baptism are seen as he bears divine wrath in his suffering and death on the cross. But why is Jesus asking James and John if they're able to drink that cup and be baptized with that baptism?

It's certainly not because they, like Jesus, will pay the penalty for our sins in their substitutionary deaths, as Jesus will. So, this isn't an exact one-for-one situation. However, Jesus is saying that what he's just stated as true of him is also true of his followers. In other words, just as Jesus will not enter glory apart from suffering, neither will his disciples. We will one day reign with him but not without suffering with him. He makes that clear elsewhere in saying that a disciple is not above his teacher nor a servant above his master, before noting that if they called him Beelzebul "how much more will they malign those of his household" (Matt 10:24-25).

Jesus affirms this further after James and John respond that they are indeed able to suffer as Jesus will suffer. Jesus responds to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized" (v. 39). And we know historically that James and John did indeed face intense suffering and persecution before entering into the presence of Christ upon their deaths. James was martyred and John was exiled, just to name some of their suffering.

But Jesus' opening point is clear. If you're going to imagine sharing in my glory, then you must recognize that you'll share in my suffering. "However," we might respond, "surely that's only true of Jesus' close disciples like James and John and not everyone." But the Scripture makes clear that these closest of Jesus' disciples are no exceptions. Paul writes in Romans 8:16-17, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow with Christ, *provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*" That is, just as Christ entered glory through the path of suffering, so will we, his followers.

There are multiple reasons why this is important for us to recognize. First, we do not need to panic, thinking something is wrong with us in times of suffering. Jesus told us this would happen. And, second, we need to strengthen our resolve not to walk away from Christ in order to avoid suffering. It may be the case that you can avoid suffering if you'll distance yourself from Christ. I'm certain that could have been the case with our Nigerian brothers and sisters over the years as they've been martyred. But remember that this life is not all there is, and for those who endure, we'll receive the crown of life, while those who shrink back will face the wrath of the one they've denied. So, let us recognize that there is not glory without suffering and pray that our Lord will strengthen us to endure.

As the story continues and Jesus informs James and John that his Father has prepared places of honor in his kingdom for certain ones so that Jesus cannot now grant them this request, we're told that the other disciples are indignant (v. 41). And it's not that they're indignant because

James and John have been so insensitive so as to ask for places of honor after Jesus has foretold of his own coming suffering and death. They're indignant because they feel like James and John have beaten them to the punch. In other words, they're upset that they didn't think of it first.

The reason we know that is because as the ten grow indignant, Jesus doesn't pull over James and John alone to tell them they're thinking wrongly. Rather, we're told in verse 42 that Jesus called "them," that is all of his disciples, over to him in order to teach them about the seemingly upside-down way a disciple needs to live in his kingdom. And he tells them that there is not greatness without service.

### **There is no greatness without service**

As Jesus calls the disciples over, he shows the upside-down nature of life in the kingdom by comparing how unbelievers rule over others as opposed to how Jesus wants his followers to be. He says, "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" (vv. 42-45).

Jesus tells us that those with power and authority in our world lord over others and demonstrate their authority over them. But Jesus has something different for his followers. If they want to be great, he tells them to serve. If they want to be first, he tells them to be a slave to others. In other words, as Christ's followers, we must pursue greatness in the exact opposite way the world does.

Now, before fleshing this out more, I want to note that Jesus doesn't tell his disciples *not* to pursue greatness. He could have. He could have said, "Guys, this is ridiculous. Don't try to be great." But that's not what he does. In fact, he gives us a roadmap toward greatness. He's telling us, "If you want to be really great, here's what you do. If you want to be first, follow this path." The problem is that when we hear this, for too many of us, we're no longer interested in being great or first anymore, are we?

This reminds me of C. S. Lewis's quote on our weak desires. He wrote, "Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1965), 26.

And I think Lewis is right. I think Jesus doesn't hold back in luring us toward greatness, riches, and blessings. It's just that he wants us to know those things in the age to come. And if we're going to know them in the age to come, it'll look like we're pursuing the opposite of those things in this age. We'll give away our money in pursuit of greater riches. Lay down our lives in pursuit of eternal life. And we'll commit ourselves to serving others in pursuit of true greatness. Again, this is the upside-down nature of kingdom values. So, let me challenge you to take that up and make that your pursuit.

Brothers and sisters, for most things that we're tempted to pursue in life, we really have to wrestle with our limitations. You're not as smart as some people, not as wealthy as others, not as athletic as still others, and on and on. We have to deal with our limitations. But there is nothing that keeps you from being the greatest servant (outside of Jesus) who has ever lived. Now, let me say it differently. There is nothing that keeps you from being the absolute greatest among God's redeemed people in his kingdom. All you have to do is commit yourself not to being consumed with yourself but with serving others. That's what Jesus is saying to his disciples. So, why not make this your pursuit? Jesus invites us to do that very thing.

The kingdom of God turns much of how we think on its head. If you want glory, it'll require suffering. If you want greatness, it'll require serving—just like our Lord modeled. And you may think, "Well, I'm content with not thinking too much about the age to come," but if that's your response, I want to remind you that you're not your own.

As Jesus ends our text, he reminds us not only that he served us but that he served us by giving his life as a ransom for many. The idea of ransoming someone is buying them back. Imagine, for example, that you sold yourself into slavery, and someone who loved you came and said, "I want to purchase that person out of slavery." Well, there'd be a cost, but if you paid it, you could be said to have ransomed that person. But here's the catch. The person who pays the ransom is rightfully said to have purchased your life. You are theirs. I think that's what Paul is saying when he tells us, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:19-20), and Peter reminds us that the price of your redemption was the very blood of Christ (1 Pet 1:18-19). And so we belong to him. He's purchased us. He's ransomed us. He gave himself in our place so that we might be made his own.

Therefore, as servants of Christ, we absolutely must be committed to the seemingly upside-down realities of the kingdom. We must be willing to suffer and die, enduring in faithfulness to our Lord, even if it costs us everything because we know we'll gain much more. We must be willing to be the lowest and serve all, knowing we'll have a greatness nothing in this world can touch. And we must be willing to follow our king, knowing that though he suffered and died, he was raised, reigns, and will come again. And when he does, may we be found faithfully committed to the value and ways of his kingdom. Amen.