

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Following the Leader

(Mark 10:32-45)

Study #21

Introduction: Mobility, up and down...

You graduate Kindergarten and ascend through the Elementary grades only to continue moving up through Middle and High School.

When you are finished with your education (be that High School, college, or grad school), you move up to the job market.

Your career zooms onward and upward, allowing you to buy a starter home, out of which you will move in a few years into a larger house with a bigger mortgage.

What I've just described is upward mobility. That is the American way. That's the way it is supposed to be. But, we all know that it's not the way it always is.

- Sports legends past their prime are reduced to being "role players" who come off the bench to relieve the starters.
- The violinist will tell you that the toughest instrument to play is "second fiddle," especially if he has enjoyed the limelight of the first chair.
- Professional engineers in their fifties, laid off from jobs they have held for years, are replaced with a less expensive 30-something, requiring the old pro to take another job at half his former pay.

Downward mobility is tough to take. But, for many people today, economically, socially, and vocationally, downward mobility is the rule.

Of the two - downward and upward mobility - upward is way more fun. It's a much more appealing trajectory. But pursued in a certain way, there is a beauty to downward mobility.

Look carefully at the life of Jesus and you will see an intentionally chosen downward trajectory. He moved from heaven to earth and from the cradle to the cross. And we self-define as followers of Jesus...

Now I don't think that we followers of Jesus are commanded to take the lower paying of the two job offers we get. But there are dramatic implications arising from the fact that we are called to follow the downwardly mobile Jesus.

Today's passage challenges us to high-octane discipleship and prompts heartfelt worship as we see our Servant Savior in action.

Mid-way through the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus and the twelve apostles plus a good-sized group of tag-alongs were moving south toward Jerusalem.

Mark tells us that, contrary to His normal habit, Jesus was not walking with the crowds. He was up ahead, by Himself.

Preview to the Cross (vv. 32-34)

Tension on the Road (v. 32a)

[32a] They were on the road going up¹ to Jerusalem,² and Jesus was walking on ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were fearful.

¹ We might think it strange to read that Jesus was going "up" to Jerusalem, since He was actually traveling south (and as all of us know, south is down!). But, a trip to the city of Jerusalem always entailed a physical ascent, because the city was located in the highlands (a holy land parallel to our Texas Hill Country) of Palestine. As well, Jerusalem was considered the uplifted, exalted city because of its holy nature.

Jesus walks alone

On this journey Jesus' travel style differed from the norm. This is His final trip to Jerusalem. He is going there to die.

Usually, time on the road afforded great opportunities for teaching and storytelling and interaction with His followers. It is easy to envision Jesus telling the stories we find in the Gospels as they walked from place to place.

We picture Him strolling by the seashore and telling the story about finding the pearl of great price. He walks on an upland meadow and talks about the lilies of the field. He tells the story of the soils and the sower as they walked by a newly planted field.

Jesus usually walked *with* the crowds, but on this day, He was walking *ahead* of them, all by Himself.

Knowing what was ahead of Him in Jerusalem it is easy to imagine that Jesus was lost in thought, preoccupied with the events that were just around the corner.

Those behind are fearful

Not surprisingly, the disciples and those in the crowd behind picked up on Jesus' mood.

It's not hard to do. You can all tell if someone you know well is feeling happy or sad or angry. No words need be spoken. And the disciples caught Jesus' sober spirit without Him having to say a thing.

It made them nervous. They became fearful, wondering what in the world was wrong with Jesus.

At some point, sensing the tension that He had caused, He turned His attention to the twelve and spoke to them. He spoke to them as a friend speaks to his friends.

He took the time to explain to them (this is the third time He has done this) the things that were about to happen to Him.³

Revelation on the Road (vv. 32b-34)

[32b]...And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him, [33] 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 hand Him over to the Gentiles⁴; [34] They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again."⁵

These predictions have become more and more specific with each telling.⁶ This is the most specific yet. Not wanting His followers to be caught unawares, He didn't pull any punches. He told them exactly how it was all going to play out when they got to Jerusalem.

And we can only imagine how Jesus must have felt as He spoke to His followers. He was looking ahead to being betrayed by one of His own followers and to being condemned by His fellow Jews. Anticipating this ordeal would have been gut-wrenching.

He was certainly seeking to prepare His friends for the time when He would no longer be with them. But - and think about this - Jesus was also inviting His friends to share His pain.

Of those on earth, these twelve were His most intimate companions. Yes, He was their Lord and Savior. Yes, they were followers. But they were also His friends.

³ Jesus had already referred to His death at 8:31, 9:9-10, and 9:30-32.

⁴ For these Jews to be told that Jesus would be handed over to the Gentiles would have added more terror. To have the Gentiles kill a Jew WAS to be crucified - that was what the Gentiles (the Romans) did when they killed a Jew.

⁵ See Isaiah 53; Psalm 22.

⁶ Ray Stedman says that Jesus learned all that would happen to Him from the Old Testament Scriptures, and there certainly are dozens of Old Testament references to the sufferings of the Messiah.

² This is the first time the destination is actually spelled out, although the reference to the Sanhedrin (8:31) lets us know that His rejection will be in Jerusalem.

Just wondering...

Now, if you had been one of Jesus' closest friends, and had just heard Him say what we just heard Him say to the twelve, what do you think your immediate reaction would have been?

After this most detailed, specific disclosure to date of His coming sufferings, I would like to think that I would have felt - and expressed - some sorrow about what Jesus was saying. I hope that sympathy would have flowed from me to Jesus.

When a friend graphically describes some suffering he is going through or is anticipating I like to picture myself going to him, putting my arm around him, and seeking to console him in some way. That's what friends do for each other. I'll bet that is what you would do, too.

Well, that is not what happens here. Jesus was telling them about a coming cross, but their minds were elsewhere.

Shortly after Jesus had spoken about His coming sufferings, He must have begun to walk ahead of the Twelve again.

Two of the apostles, James and John,⁷ separated themselves from the others and took the opportunity to approach Him - alone. They've got something they want to talk to Jesus about.

We'll Take a Crown, Thanks... (vv. 35-40)

Round 1: Who's in Charge? (vv. 35-36)

The Sons of Thunder, thunder (v. 35)

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

⁷ In another place, Jesus referred to these two brothers as "*the Sons of Thunder*" - and that gives us an idea as to their personalities. They distinguished themselves by their thundering zeal for Jesus at several points, most famously in Luke 9. There, they became incensed at some Samaritans who refused to let Jesus pass through their region. In response to this lack of respect of Jesus, James and John asked Him if He wanted them to call down fire from Heaven to consume these Samaritans.

HUH?

Do you recall teachers telling you in school, "*The only bad question is the one not asked.*"? Those teachers never heard this one! Talk about **insensitivity**!

Imagine a friend pouring out his heart to you, telling you his story. He is unlocking the door to his pain, and crying out for a listening ear. He longs for your support.

What do you do? Do you change channels, switch subjects, not pursue? Or even worse, would you ever do what James and John do here - ignore your friend's pain and try to promote your own agenda?

At the men's retreat a couple of weeks ago, there was some real transparency. It got pretty real and authentic. While one man was pouring out his heart, never once did I see another man yarn with disinterest. Never did another guy dismiss the painful story he was hearing.

But James and John did that to Jesus. They demonstrate world class insensitivity. Their antenna is completely tuned to their own channel at the hour of Jesus' greatest need.

And talk about **blind ambition**! These two - the greatest zealots among the twelve - were also the most ambitious.

Think about what they have done. They have asked a favor from Jesus to the DIS-advantage of their friends! "*Let US have the positions of prominence, and (implied) NOT these other ten!*"

And talk about **demandingness**! They were seeking to tie Jesus' hands in advance. They wanted Him to promise to do their bidding before they even made their request.

If ever there was confusion as to who was the Boss, it was here. They are demanding that Jesus to do for them whatever they request.

But, watch Jesus. Rather than blast back at them, Jesus (who knows full well who is the Boss) is so wise in His response to them. There is method to His reply.

Jesus' cautious reply (v. 36)

[36] And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

Notice that He didn't rebuke them for their request. Nor did He promise to do for them whatever they asked. He just asked them to state their desires openly.

Jesus invited James and John to fully disclose their thoughts and desires. He draws them out. He wants them to hold nothing back.

Why?

It is because change only occurs when we are brutally honest about what is really going on. No pretending. He didn't want them to sugarcoat their approach to Him. He didn't want them coming with flowery language trying to fake Him out. *"Nope. Just tell it to Me straight."*

We can take a cue from the way Jesus dealt with James and John here, folks. He wants us to be honest with Him, too. He wants you and me to tell Him what we really think, feel and want.

And it's not that we express our every thought to Him with the confidence that He will grant our every whim, or that He will say "Yes" to our every request.

It is with the confidence that when we bring to Him who we really are, He will change us into the kinds of people we want to be. He will change us into people who are being conformed to the image of Jesus, people who know how to trust.

So, what do these two apostles request? Listen.

Round 2: Ignorant Asking (vv. 37-38)

Requesting cabinet-level posts (v. 37)

[37] They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right, and one on Your left, in Your glory."

We wonder what in the world would have prompted this request.

Did they feel that they had a right to ask Jesus for this favor because they had seen His glory up on top of the Mount of Transfiguration? (If so, it is funny, then, that they didn't include Peter, but cut him out of this "loop"...)

They obviously thought they were going up to Jerusalem to be fitted for thrones - not for crosses. They wanted to be first in line for cabinet positions in Jesus' kingdom.

James and John had separated themselves from the other ten, walked ahead to be with Jesus, and sought Him out solely for the purpose of fulfilling their own agendas.

We probably shouldn't be surprised at this request. It is consistent with what I know of my own leanings - looking out for #1. Me first. But it is an ugly request.

Jesus' reply to them is measured and calm.

Jesus' probing question (v. 38)

[38] But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

In the Old Testament, the cup could stand for either God's wrath or for great joy. In the 23rd Psalm, when David writes, *"my cup overflows"* he means that his life is full of joy. But, in the book of Jeremiah, the *cup* symbolized the wrath of God.

In short, "cup" stands for the whole gamut of our experience, the circumstances into which we are placed. The cup we are to drink is whatever life hands us. And, in this context in Mark 10, the "cup" in view is not a pleasant one - it was the cup of God's wrath against sin.⁸

When Jesus asked them if they were able to be baptized with His baptism, He was indicating His death.

⁸ Remember Jesus' anguished wrestling in the Garden of Gethsemene, *"Let this cup pass from Me..."*

The word “baptize” means to “immerse” or “to submerge,” and the idea here is that of being overwhelmed with calamities.⁹

Jesus questions James’ and John’s capacity to share in His cup and baptism. He wants them to think carefully about what it is they are asking.

But they have (they think) thought about it. Here is their answer.

Round 3: Ready? Or Not? (vv. 39-40)

Bring it on! (v. 39a)

[39a] They said to him, “We are able.”

Short, sweet and right to the point. James and John may lack understanding, but they don’t lack courage or loyalty. They are brimming with confidence. They were more than willing to “drink the cup” and “be baptized” (whatever that means) if that is the way to the crowns they seek.

We can almost see Jesus shaking His head in sadness at their response. His next words, though, do assure them of a certain future.

Jesus’ cryptic “yes” (vv. 39b-40)

[39b]...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.” [40] 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.”

Their request - places of honor in the coming kingdom - was as ignorant as it was presumptuous. Their response to Jesus’ question was uninformed - and Jesus knew it.

But, since they claimed to be up to the task of the cup and baptism, He promised both of them both of them.

He was promising them the privilege of suffering for Him. And we know that they did both suffer.

⁹ Secular Greek has examples of “baptism” being a metaphor for being “swamped” and “overwhelmed.”

James became the first of the apostles to die a martyr’s death when he was put to death by Herod. (Acts 12)

John’s life was tough, even if he wasn’t martyred (although one tradition holds that he was boiled in oil). We do know that late in life he was exiled to the Mediterranean island of Patmos for his faithful witness for Christ.

In fact, James and John form a “parenthesis of martyrdom” for the apostolic band, being the first (James), and the last (John) to die.

At the end of the day, Jesus does promise the brothers a cup and a baptism. And, He does not deny that there will be places of honor in His kingdom. He just can’t guarantee that James or John will be sitting in those places of honor. Evidently, it’s not even up to Him to make those assignments.

Now, this little conversation has not been lost on the rest of the apostolic band. In fact, the ten had noticed James’ and John’s approach to Jesus, and had probably inched a little closer as they walked.

When they got the drift of the chat, they had a very strong emotional response.

Following a Servant Messiah (vv. 41-45)

The Ten: “How dare they!” (v. 41)

[41] Hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant¹⁰ with James and John.

And why would the ten become indignant over the request of the two brothers? What was it about James’ and John’s request that so infuriated the ten?

Were they just really upset at the brothers’ self-centeredness? Were they indignant that apostles should have such bad attitudes?

¹⁰ Same word used here (indignant) that described Jesus’ reaction to the harsh treatment of the children by the disciples.

I don't think so...

I'm pretty sure it was because James and John beat them to the punch. They had ALL wanted the places of prominence and were upset that James and John had gotten to Jesus first.

This is a very unedifying scene. In fact, the reaction of the ten was no more praiseworthy than that of the two.

The ten betray their own spiritual shallowness by becoming indignant at the spiritual shallowness of the two. (Isn't it predictable that selfishness would provoke the greatest resentment in the selfish?)

So, here is Jesus, just a few short days away from His just announced death by crucifixion, and He has quite a mess on His hands.

Two of His disciples wanted to cut to the front of the line to receive the first pickings in the Kingdom. And the remaining ten were ticked off at them - not because they were offended by the self-serving mindsets of the two - but because they wanted the ringside seats themselves.

At this point in His earthly career, Jesus knew that His time was short. There just wasn't much time left for Him to drive home key discipleship truths. There was certainly no time to teach on peripheral subjects. He couldn't afford to waste His breath on non-essentials.

So, He called them all together and huddled them up for a review of the basics of following Him. What does it mean to follow a servant Messiah? What constitutes greatness in His kingdom?

Greatness, Jesus Style (vv. 42-44)

"Leadership" in the world (v. 42)

[42] 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.'

Leaders are those at the top of the heap. Leaders have followers under them. The followers take orders.

The history of the world is the story of strong leaders giving commands, giving orders, telling others what to do, bossing people around.

Of course, there are "good bosses" and benevolent rulers in the world today. But generally speaking, rulers rule with an iron fist - even if it is sometimes velvet-covered.

It wouldn't take us long to develop an impressive list of tyrants who have lorded it over the weak in recent generations - Mao Tse Tung, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Polpot, Idi Amin, Ho Chi Minh, Kim Jong-il, Tito, Saddam Hussein, Nicolae Ceausescu.

The death of Libyan strongman Moammar Gaddafi this past week reminds us that not much has changed over the last two thousand years.

You might be able to tell stories of oppression from your own life. A boss that cracked the whip. Someone in a position with the government who made life miserable for you. A religious leader who barked orders at you.

The world works by favors, maneuvering, special privileges, politicking, and by the exploitation of the weak by the strong and the rich over the poor.

Jesus' kingdom will work differently.

Jesus' "Leadership 101" (vv. 43-44)

[43] But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; [44] and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all."

Those words sum up the revolutionary ethics of Jesus' kingdom. And it is an absolutely radically arranged kingdom.

Jesus doesn't at all condemn the desire for greatness. It is not bad to want to be great in the work of Christ. He doesn't say it is wrong to want to be first.

He simply points out that there is a certain order to be followed in attaining greatness, influence, and power in His Kingdom.

And that order is this: *Authority, greatness and firstness in His Kingdom is established through service.*

Every writer of New Testament Scripture is careful to remind us of the danger of leaders - elders, pastors, bishops - lording it over the brethren. There is no pecking order in the church.

There is constant awareness in the New Testament that those who are in positions of authority must not think that they have the right to tell others what to do.

The idea of greatness we bring with us from the world is that of the pyramid. We reach up and up until we can get to the top. The higher we climb, the fewer equals we have, and the more subordinates.

But, in Jesus' scheme of things, we climb down the pyramid.

We begin life in Jesus with ME at the top. I am what my life is all about. Growing in Jesus involves moving down so that we serve more and more people. Our Jesus wants us to join Him in the pursuit of downward mobility in our race to the top.

In Jesus, those have greatest influence who count it a privilege to serve. God counts us great in His Kingdom as we put others ahead of ourselves.

And, to show that this is a principle of the first degree in the life of those who call themselves "disciples" - that this is not some peripheral thing - Jesus gives us "Exhibit A" - Himself.

Exhibit A: Jesus (v. 45)

[45] For even the Son of Man did not come to be served,¹¹ but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

¹¹ The Son of Man provides the supreme model of status reversal in that He whose destiny it was *"to be served"* (Daniel 7:14) would become the servant of all.

Jesus' life purpose

So far in this Gospel, Mark has quoted Jesus two times to tell us *why* He came to earth.

Both times, the Lord tells us that He came to reach those who were far from God and to bring them near. He came to earth to save us from our sin.

The first time was at a party thrown by the newly minted disciple, Matthew. Some Pharisees objected to Him, a rabbi, eating with the likes of Matthew. Jesus responded, *"I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

And now here, He says that He came to earth to serve us all by giving His life *"as a ransom."*

We can't miss the thought of substitution here. Jesus Christ came to take your place. He took the punishment for sin that was due you and me.

In fact, this verse literally says that He gave His life as a ransom *instead of* the many!¹² His death will not be a meaningless tragedy, but the means of salvation for all who will place their trust in Him.

We haven't gotten there yet in our study of Mark. But we will see that Jesus served us by self-sacrificing love when He died on the cross.

Have you yet, personally, responded to Jesus' self-sacrificing act of loving service by placing your trust in Him for your salvation?

The reason He came to earth, as He says here, was to ransom your soul, to buy it back for God. He wants you to spend eternity with Him and He gave His own life to offer you the priceless gift of eternal life.

Would you place your faith in Him now? Trust Him and you will know what it is to become a child of God, to have your sins forgiven, to know that you will be with God forever, and to experience Jesus' abundant life here and now.

¹² Greek "anti" = instead of. Jesus died and suffered the righteous wrath of God so that we, putting our trust in God, would never suffer that wrath.

Your life purpose

And having placed your faith in Him, are you ready to serve, as He served?

As of the tenth chapter, the apostles James and John didn't "get" the whole "service" thing. But they "got it" later. They both gave their lives for Jesus, suffering solely because they laid down their lives, telling others about the Good News.

I'm not suggesting for a minute that they - or we, today - are called to offer our lives as a ransom as Jesus did. He was uniquely capable of ransoming our souls to bring us to God.

But if we are to follow this Jesus into servanthood, we are to follow Him into a certain kind of servanthood.

There are all kinds of great reasons to live responsibly and to serve others in the daily routines of life. And we should do that.

I think, though, that it would be a mistake to see what we have seen today and think to ourselves, *"Jesus served. I should serve, too. I'll clean up my room. I'll take out the trash. I'll even do chores for others. I'll be a servant."*

I'm not saying that we shouldn't keep our rooms clean. And there is something really, really wonderful and God-honoring about service, generally. But I am saying that Jesus is not telling us to pick up after ourselves or others here.

He is calling us to a radical laying down of our lives so that others will know of His love for them - a ransom-like love.

To carry out that call, James and John and multitudes more have literally given up their lives.

Others have deprived themselves of creature comforts they might have enjoyed so as to fund Gospel ministry around the world.

Some have risked the loss of reputation by even being associated with Jesus. Some have crossed oceans to risk everything to share Jesus with people they have never known. Some (like you and me) may be called upon to walk across a street or a room to let a friend know that Jesus loves them.

Here is the question before each of us today: Given that Jesus gave His life as a ransom for you, to what self-sacrificing act of love does He call you, today?