

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church  
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Sermon title: Who Will Be First? Mark 10:32-45

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**INTRODUCTION:** The question, “Who will be first,” comes up a lot in today’s world, whether it is regarding who’s first in line, whose spiritual or political view is most important, or whose needs or wants should be considered first. Today, we will examine this question from the disciples’ point of view. There are three points to my message today:

1. The disciples ask **a selfish favor** (Verses 35-37).
2. Jesus spoke **a sober foretelling** (Verses 38-40).
3. Jesus provided **a spiritual approach** to being great (Verses 41-45).

**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 10:32-34 <sup>32</sup> *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.* <sup>33</sup> *“We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles,* <sup>34</sup> *who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”*

**EXPLANATION:** This is a curious verse that can be easily overlooked. Jesus and his followers are making their way to Jerusalem, with Jesus in the lead—the traditional order in which a rabbi traveled in those days. But, why are the disciples astonished and afraid? The word for *afraid* here is *phobeo* from which we get our word *phobia*. It means “to put to flight” or “to be seized with alarm.”

By now, the disciples knew the Jews in Jerusalem were out to get Jesus, and they were concerned they were headed back to Jerusalem. They could see the focus in Jesus’ demeanor and knew they weren’t going to be able to deter him. They knew trouble was ahead, but they didn’t understand the full impact of what awaited them.

In verses 33-34, Jesus predicts his death for a third time, and they are still not getting it. They are still a pretty dull Bible class. As we'll see, they are more concerned with what their position is going to be in the kingdom than they are with the fact Jesus has just told them he is going to be killed. Amazing!

The scripture simply goes on in verse 35 to tell us about James and John's jostling for a prime position when Jesus establishes his kingdom rather than spending time expounding on what Jesus has just told them about his death.

But, let's not be too hard on them. Haven't you ever had an opportunity to have a scripture you have read or glossed over for your whole life suddenly radiate with "new" truth?—something that has been there all along, but it just didn't penetrate your spirit?

### **First, THE DISCIPLES ASK A SELFISH FAVOR (Verses 35-37).**

**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 10:35-37 <sup>35</sup> *Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."*

<sup>36</sup> *"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.*

<sup>37</sup> *They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."*

**EXPLANATION:** In these verses, James and John approach Jesus and ask a favor of him. They requested they be given the highest positions in the kingdom—to sit at the right and left hand of his throne. They wanted to be close to Jesus in the kingdom. They wanted a place of pre-eminence. They wanted a place of authority. And, actually they had some basis for making this request:

- They had a relationship with Jesus. In Matthew 20:20-21, we find Salome, their mother, made the initial request. Salome was Mary's sister, so James and John were Jesus' first cousins. They were family. Certainly their cousin would look with favor upon his relatives.
- They were merely claiming promises made in Matthew 19:28 of thrones, power, and position in the kingdom to come. They were simply asking for

what had already been promised to them, but their timing was awful. They just could not grasp the fact Jesus was headed toward his death on a cross. All they could see was the crown. They wanted the glory of the crown without the pain of the cross.

**APPLICATION:** It's the same problem we have today. Most people are not concerned with God's glory. The only thing most of us care about is finishing first—our own success, our own prestige, our own position. What if God would get more glory from my finishing last? Would I be willing to do that?

It's been a while since I've spent time with a group of pastors at a convention, but the topic of discussions are usually number of baptisms, size of the congregation, the amount of the church budget, or building programs. And, those are good things, but rarely do we discuss our benevolent food boxes or how many addicts we have reached out to.

**ILLUSTRATION:** There was a Christian promotion a few years ago called, "I Am Second." It has gone viral with literally millions of people watching the avant-garde type testimonies of individuals who have found Jesus. The people sit in a plain white chair, in a darkened room, sharing how they came to Jesus. The testimonies are quick-moving and dynamic. The title of the series, I assume, means Jesus is first, and they are second.

However, most of us—and I would guess perhaps many of the people giving those testimonies—struggle with putting ourselves second in real life. Most people do everything they can to better themselves or to climb the ladder of success and think very little of those they step on to get on the top rung of that ladder.

I've been told those who write Christian books, which reveal God's redemption, have to do their own promotion. They have to spend money promoting themselves and their books, even if they are picked up by a major publishing company. Some struggle with this because it seems to be the opposite of the humility Jesus teaches we should have. Of course, they could write trite stuff about how to have a good day every day with their photo on the front, "all smiles," but some are dedicated to writing about deep spiritual truths. It's those writers who have to find their own way.

I guess my point here is: the world's concept of success is to promote oneself, get ahead, get the sales, or hit the top seller list—even in Christian publishing. It is primarily a business, not a ministry, and certainly not the principle of being last.

Review—

- The disciples ask a selfish favor and—

## **Second, JESUS SPOKE A SOBER FORETELLING (Verses 38-40).**

**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 10:38-40 <sup>38</sup> *“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?”*

<sup>39</sup> *“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, <sup>40</sup> 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.”*

**EXPLANATION:** Jesus responds to the request, not with rebuke, but by telling them they have no idea what they are asking. He asks if they are willing and able to endure what he is about to go through.

They respond by telling Jesus they can, but their response reveals a complete lack of understanding about what he is about to suffer. However, Jesus foretells they will indeed experience his suffering to a degree. They, of course, will not bear the sins of mankind, but they will die for their faith. All of them eventually died a martyr's death, except for John, who was exiled and persecuted for his faith.

Jesus then explains that positions in the kingdom would not be given based on selfish ambition, but according to the sovereign will of God.

Review—

- The disciples ask a selfish favor.
- Jesus spoke a sober foretelling, and—

### **Third, JESUS PROVIDED A SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO BEING GREAT (Verses 41-45).**

**SCRIPTURE:** Mark 10:41-45 <sup>41</sup> *When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.* <sup>42</sup> *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.* <sup>43</sup> *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,* <sup>44</sup> *and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.* <sup>45</sup> *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.”*

**EXPLANATION:** The other ten disciples reacted in anger to what James and John had done, but Jesus quells the little mini-rebellion and nips it in the bud. People in the Church are not always going to act like we think they should. But, we mustn't harbor offenses within our hearts. It will hinder the work of God in our midst. It will quench the move of the Holy Spirit.

It may be events which occurred 5, 10, 20 years ago, but those things need to be made right.

**ILLUSTRATION:** A woman in her 80's took a plane across the country to try to make right something that had happened when she and her sister were in their 30s. There had been some misunderstanding about an inheritance all those years ago, and one of the sisters wanted to make it right. She had an experience with Lord, and she knew what she needed to do. She went to her sister, who kind of dismissed it all. But, now the woman who took the initiative was free.

**APPLICATION:** When there are hard feelings between members of God's family, it hinders the work of the Church. It renders the Church weak and powerless. Why is the Church of God so powerless today? Could it be because of un-forgiveness and bitterness harbored within the walls for years? Could it be because our love for each other in the body is weak?

Jesus did not let those feelings among his followers continue for one second. He'd told the disciples in John 13:35 relationships within his body are to be characterized by love. We are to love each other with unconditional, unflinching, unquestioning love. If we don't, the problem is not with you and what you have done. The

problem is with me, and my unforgiving and unloving heart. What is the condition of your heart today?

God's way up is always down. The path to the top leads through the bottom. If you really want to be a leader, you must first learn how to serve.

**ILLUSTRATION:** There is a certain large church with a well-known music ministry. I am sure Terry knows who they are. I've heard in large churches, there are people who want to walk up front and become the church superstar without doing any of the hard work everyone else does. In this particular church, however, it is full of young people. They have to start out by setting up equipment and working backstage. After a year or so, they are permitted to audition. After that, they have to rehearse for several months before they are allowed to lead the church. And, when they walk onto the platform, they are truly leading worship, not performing.

**EXPLANATION:** In verse 43, Jesus uses the word *servant* which is the word from which we get *deacon*. A deacon is to be a servant. It is not supposed to be a lofty position. It is a lowly position—someone who serves others.

**ILLUSTRATION:** I know people who've arrived early to set up chairs, pass out bulletins, or check the thermostats and the restrooms. True servant-hood is being willing to do what needs to be done without any pomp and circumstance.

**EXPLANATION:** Then, in verse 44, Jesus uses the word *servant*, which means "slave."

**APPLICATION:** What if we welcomed new members by saying, "Welcome to Tusculum Hills Baptist Church where you will find love and acceptance by being a slave?" We probably wouldn't have too many takers. But, that is the spiritual pattern for followers of Jesus.

**CONCLUSION:** The meaning is this: If we desire to be recognized and respected, we must give up all ambition and selfishness and live out our days serving others. It means being willing to take none of the credit—to get none of the glory. It means being willing to do the humblest of tasks with no thought of receiving recognition or thanks, to be a servant, to be a slave.

**CALL TO ACTION:** Do you still want to follow Jesus? I spoke last week about the hard sayings of Jesus—these are hard sayings. I fear, as your pastor, sometimes we have been guilty of making the gospel too easy. It is simple, but it is not easy.

Are we willing to give up pride and humble ourselves and ask forgiveness for offenses? Are we willing to give up comfort and suffer for Christ's sake? Are we willing to take up our crosses daily and deny ourselves for his sake? What if God's Spirit moved among us and we all missed lunch? The spiritual pattern of Jesus is being last, not first. Are we willing?

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