

Useful or Visible?

Mark 10:32-45

Nearly 140km to the east of us is the city of Witbank, renamed eMalahleni, which appropriately means 'place of coal'. The city grew up around coal mining, and the mining there continues. One of the great dangers and hazards of coal mining is that when coal is exposed to oxygen, it can spontaneously begin to burn, so in the areas around eMalahleni there are several underground coal fires burning. There are places where the smoke of these underground fires comes out, contributing to the pollution of the area. And even more dangerously, as these hidden fires continue to burn, they destabilise the ground above and around them, leading to possible sinkholes. In fact, one of the major railway lines connecting Pretoria and Mozambique is under frequent threat of collapse because of underground coal fires in disused mines.

When we think of fires, we think of surface-level, raging forest fires that we can spray from fire engines or from aircraft. We don't often think of a kind of hidden fire, underground, burning away, and showing up only when its destruction finally causes things to cave in on the surface.

Something like that exists in human hearts. It's not out on the surface in the way that other sins are. It's disguised, hidden, cloaked. But if it is not put out, it will eventually cause great destruction. It's the sin of spiritual pride. There is probably no more dangerous kind of pride than religious pride. When selfishness clothes itself in religious motives and religious garb, you can't call on it to repent, because it believes it is doing what it is doing for God. When selfish pride postures as spiritual, it is like those underground fires – doing damage, eating away at the soul, eating away at churches, but only showing up when a huge collapse occurs.

Spiritual pride is that species of pride which uses God's work, God's church, and God's name to please itself. It seeks self-promotion, self-affirmation, self-aggrandisement using the appearance of doing God's work. Families, churches and ministries are shattered and torn when people give in to the flesh's desire for pre-eminence, all the while claiming to be working for God's glory.

The fire extinguisher for this selfish and hidden fire is the heart of servant hood. Become a servant, and you extinguish spiritual pride. Be proud, and you cannot properly serve. We have within ourselves potential to be either: pride-filled destroyers, who please themselves in the name of Christ, or servant like builders who meet needs in the name of Christ.

This passage will show us the differences. We'll see a sharp contrast between servant hood and selfishness in the Lord Jesus and in His disciples. We can see which we ought to strengthen, and which we ought to mortify.

I. The Example of Servant hood

³² Now they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them; and they were amazed. And as they followed they were afraid. Then He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: ³³ "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; ³⁴ "and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again."

Here is a striking scene. A group of people making the climb to Jericho and from Jericho to Jerusalem, a climb of around 3000 feet in just 20 kilometres. A fairly steep climb and Jesus is not

dawdling, delaying, avoiding getting to Jerusalem. He is striding ahead, leading the pack. He is going to be killed at Jerusalem, but He is not heading away from Jerusalem, but towards it.

What comes to mind is the warrior kings of old who would ride at the head of their armies, meeting the enemy first, with loyal soldiers seeing the fearless courage of their king, seeking to keep up with him.

The response of the disciples is twofold. They're amazed and afraid - they're amazed because Jesus knows what is waiting for him at Jerusalem and is headed straight towards it. They're afraid because they know they'll be in danger too.

Why does Jesus march shoulders high, chin up, eyes fixed on Jerusalem? Why is He striding with determination to the place of His own execution? Because Jesus, as the whole book of Mark teaches, is the perfect Servant. What do servants do? Servants meet needs, and sacrifice if they must. Servants know what needs to be done, and make sure they do it, no matter what. Servants are not about self-image, self-preservation, self-comfort. Servants are about need-meeting, even if they have to get dirty in the process.

How dirty will Jesus' hands, so to speak, have to get to meet the need? He takes the Twelve aside and tells them for the third time in Mark, and now in the most detailed way, what the Servant will have to do to see the job through.

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; ³⁴ and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again."

Jesus will be betrayed by one of His own, falsely condemned by the chief religious leaders, handed over by Israel to the very Romans they claimed to hate, appealing to them for the death sentence. Before He is killed, He will be mocked, scourged, and spat upon. This is what the servant must endure to accomplish the Father's task for Him – to seek and to save that which was lost. But on the third day, He will rise. That kind of ultimate humility will bring ultimate exaltation.

You would think that with such an example of selfless, sacrificial servant hood, that the Twelve would be humbled and take the lowest possible place of service. But in the next few verses, we find the opposite of servant hood.

II. The Example of Selfishness vv35-41

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" ³⁷ They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared."

⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John.

James and John come to Jesus with a special request. In fact, Matthew's Gospel tells us that they got their mother, Salome, involved. Comparing Scripture with Scripture, Salome was almost certainly Mary's sister, which would make James and John the first cousins of Jesus. Nepotism is not a new phenomenon. Perhaps Salome and her sons thought they could play on their family ties to Jesus to

get their foot in the door before anyone else.

It seems that not everyone understood what Jesus meant by dying and rising from the dead, because to ask this right after Jesus has explained what awaits Him in Jerusalem, seems out of place.

Luke 9:45 *But they did not understand this saying, and it was hidden from them so that they did not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this saying.*

Perhaps they thought he would rise up in triumph on the Cross, and destroy His enemies. Perhaps they thought that He would not truly die, but rise up at the crucial moment, and defeat His enemies, both Jewish and Roman, and institute His kingdom. But clearly they were still thinking that somehow, glory and the restoration of Solomon's kingdom was around the corner.

We can cut them some slack. After Peter asked Jesus what they would receive for having forsaken all, Jesus had said:

Matthew 19:28 *"Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

So we can at least commend these men for believing Christ's word that He would reign in glory but their heart was still wrong. What were they asking for? To sit on the right and left hand side were the places of first and second rank to the king himself. They were asking for the highest places in Messiah's kingdom. Give us rank and status and fame and power and fortune and honour, second only to Your own.

What a request. Jesus says to them, you don't know what you are asking. Can you drink My cup and be immersed into My immersion? The cup and the baptism are both used to speak of judgement and wrath and suffering. In the Garden, Jesus asked the Father to take the cup away from him, if it was His will.

John the Baptist spoke of the fiery baptism of judgement that was coming to sort out the wheat from the chaff. So the idea is, I am going to drink a bitter cup of suffering. I am going to be immersed in the white-hot anger of My Father's judgement. Can you do that? In other words, no glory without suffering. No places of privilege without deep crushing and sacrifice. No places of honour without first drinking a cup of shame. That's biblical.

Romans 8:17 ¹⁷ *and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.*

And these men, whether out of the pressure of the moment, or out of sheer naivete say, "We are able."

Jesus says, "Yes, you will." Not to the same degree as Christ's cup – but a cup of similar kind – suffering for righteousness, being persecuted for the kingdom. James was beheaded by Herod in the year 44. John was boiled in hot oil before being exiled to the island of Patmos. They came to know suffering, pain, persecution. They soon lost false views of short-cuts to glory.

Jesus tells them those positions are not His to give. They are for those for whom it has been prepared. In other words, places of honour and glory are decided by God's election, and by man's faithfulness, not because someone ambitious puts in a request.

Now even though their request has been denied, the news of the request gets back to the other ten, and the Bible says they were greatly displeased. They were indignant.

Why do you think they were indignant? Was it because they had such a desire for Christ's glory that they didn't want to see it trivialised with petty ambition? Was it because they hated the sin of pride and longed for James and John's restoration to humility? No, I think we all sense that they were upset because they didn't think of it first! They were upset because James and John had been bold enough to ask for what they had secretly wanted.

Nothing offends one man's pride more than the pride of another. While we stand there shaking our heads at this proud bunch of squabbling, ambitious disciples, we might want to ask, why did the Holy Spirit include this in Scripture? Is this section like a zoo exhibit, where we point and gawk at the behaviour of the disciple and move on, thankful that we are not like they are? Or is it meant to be a mirror, where we see ourselves?

None of us has asked Jesus to sit on His left or right side in His kingdom. But that's not the heart of this sin. That was just the application. The heart of this sin is the desire for pre-eminence. It's a me-first attitude. I want my way, I want to be prominent, important, influential, cloaked in spiritual terms. It's religious pride.

Does this ever find its way into the 21st century church? How about pastors who seek praise and honour for their sermons, and are offended if they are not praised? How about church members who are disgruntled if they are not publicly recognised for their service, publicly thanked? How about church leaders who are bitter if they must do the menial tasks, washing, gardening, picking up? What about church members who want their ministry promoted, mentioned, highlighted, and feel quite upset if it is not? What about Christians who choose where they will serve, not by what needs it will meet, but by how influential it will make them, how much attention it will get them, how respected they will become in the eyes of others? What about those who use their convictions not to please God, but to gain distinction and envy in the eyes of others? What about church members who insist that their point of view prevail over everyone else's, that their objection bring everything to a halt, that their grievances ought to become the leadership's number 1 priority? What about leaders who pursue celebrity status, because in our culture you're only as important as you are widely-known, so they pursue media ministries, promote themselves, and even hire agents and publicists to groom and spread their image? What about Christians who rate the spirituality of their leaders by how well-known they are, by how influential and powerful they are?

What is this? It is the same thing that drove James and John. Me-firstness. the pre-eminence of me. My aims, my desires, my ambitions, my opinions must nudge everyone and everything else out the way and get its place in the sun, its share of attention, its sway over decisions.

How we see churches torn in two by unbridled ambition. How we see marriages torn apart by me-firstness. How we see families torn apart by the pre-eminence of self. Spiritual pride blinds, because the man pursuing his destructive agenda can never see his me-firstness for what it is: pride! All he sees is this issue that must be sorted out – he must prevail, win the argument, see this thing changed, get this thing promoted, uphold his distinctiveness. What he can't see is that, while he may even be right about the issue, his pride is controlling him and elevating it to pre-eminence. So you find many a man claiming to be a builder who ends up as a destroyer.

And the way to test if this me-firstness is driving your heart is to ask, what happens if you are denied? What if you are not recognised or thanked? What if your suggestion is heard but not

submitted to? What if your objection is overruled? What if your ministry is forgotten? What if you fade into anonymity? What if someone colours outside your lines, offends your sensibilities? What if you end up with a task that no one else wants? What if you serve and are not promoted for years? If you are as greatly displeased as the other disciples, then perhaps the same thing dwells in your heart.

So Jesus took these twelve proud men aside, and said words to them which are still for every one of us who battles against pride.

III. The Explanation of Servanthood

⁴² But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. ⁴⁴ "And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.

The Jews lived under Roman rule, and they were well-acquainted with the Roman way of doing things. Roman authority established itself through sheer dominance. The strong conquered the weak, subjugated them, and ruled them against their will. In the Roman army, in the Roman senate, you rose in the ranks because you defeated and crushed your rivals. Jesus says that rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the word in the original means to dominate, to overcome with power. Leaders, great ones rule as those who have got to the top by stepping on those at the bottom.

But with Christ's followers, a different law is to prevail. A different kind of leadership is to take place. A different kind of promotion takes place. What is it?

If you are spiritually ambitious, in a good way, you become ambitious to serve. If you have a desire to succeed, to excel, to come first, then excel but come first at being a slave, a slave of all the others.

What does this look like? Here are some simple ways to remember it. Don't seek to be visible, seek to be useful. Don't seek to be prominent, seek to be fruitful. True disciples seek usefulness, not fame or honour. The servant of all looks for needs to meet, not opportunities to shine.

Be first in service. Be the greatest at meeting needs. Be the most useful, the most available, the most sacrificial. Find the needs in your church. Start a genuine pursuit of need-meeting. Stop looking for ways to control, or be noticed, or be praised, or be well-thought of. Abandon being your own PR agent. Stop seeking to get your way, straighten everyone else out, be the policeman or watchdog of the church, and basically assert your pre-eminence in a church with plenty of other people with plenty of other needs besides those of your ego.

We all claim to be serving the Lord Christ and what did He, the Lord of glory, do?

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

What did the Lord Jesus do, He who had created and commanded Michael, Gabriel, and angelic beings of such fierce majesty that we would worship them if they did not stop us? He who had always had pre-eminence, being the brightness of the Father's glory, the subject of the seraphim's worship day and night, He who had always had His way, for all things were made by Him and without Him nothing was made that was made. He who had spoke and it happened, commanded

and it was done. He who had all his wishes done by millions of willing angels - what did He do?

He came from dimensions of glory our brains cannot fathom. He came first of all to a womb, embracing true humanity with its growth, and need, and limits. This is the CEO disguised as the janitor, except it's no disguise. He embraced being born in humiliating circumstances, growing up in anonymous surroundings, and being unrecognised by His own – including His own half-brothers and sisters. He embraced being opposed by the official religion of the day, being ultimately rejected by the nation, and betrayed, forsaken and denied by his closest friends. He embraced mocking, unfair, brutal, illegal treatment, staggering physical abuse, the torture of the Cross, and the deepest wound of all - His Father becoming His Judge.

This is God, walking in the sewers of our sin, because that's where we were. This is the Ruler of all, stooping, because that's the posture He needed to be in to save us where we were.

He did not come to get His way, but to give it up, so that He could be a ransom for many. *Ransom* means payment – He paid the necessary price for the saving of sinners. Verse 45 is really the summary verse of the whole book of Mark: Jesus the ultimate Servant, who came to die as our substitute.

So what shall we do if we call Him Lord and Master and ourselves His servants? Are we better than He? If He stooped so low, to give up His pre-eminence, shall we fight with one another? Shall we assert our rights over each other? Shall we insist on the pre-eminence of our opinions, our decisions, our ministries, our reputations? What a way to treat the Cross of Christ, when those saved by the service of the Cross, would forsake the very attitude that took Christ there.

What a contrast between the selfish ambition of the Twelve, and the selfless service of their master, between their self-seeking glory and His self-sacrificing service. All humans long to see noble, sacrificial leadership with true integrity. Look to Christ, then we who name Him are to imitate Him. If He washed feet, if He emptied Himself, then let us seek to be first in usefulness.

If this passage is true, then what sort of world do you live in? You live in a world where unseen service is seen by the One who promotes. You live in a world where outward prominence counts for very little in eternity. You live in a world where those who step on others to get to the top will be on their pitiful little mound for a short time before a great, and indeed bottomless, fall.

So then make one of the mottoes of your life, “God is my audience.” Look for usefulness, fruitfulness, need-meeting service, and leave the prominence, the visibility, the honour up to God.