

Discipleship According to Mark

Ambition Redeemed (Mark 10:32-52)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at Houston Chinese Church on June 14, 2026

Introduction

- ❖ In this morning's passage, we encounter Jesus's third and final passion prediction on his way to Jerusalem. **On three separate occasions, he reveals to his disciples exactly what will happen when they arrive in Jerusalem.** How he will be betrayed and beaten and killed and yet rise again on the third day. And what's striking is how his disciples react the same way each time. With confusion and delusions of grandeur.
 - He says he's going to suffer. They react by arguing who among them is the greatest. He says he's going to be killed. They react by pleading for special favor—to be granted seats of honor in his coming kingdom. **His words are apparently falling on deaf ears.** His disciples are apparently blind to what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, to be God's Messiah.
 - It's like they can't see past themselves. No matter what he tells them. No matter how much he reveals of himself and his mission. **His disciples can only think of themselves. They can't see past themselves.**

- ❖ There's an old Latin phrase that ancient theologians used to describe this reality. **They use to say that fallen human beings are *incurvatus in se*—that is, we're “curved in on ourselves.”** As creatures made in God's image, we were made to function like mirrors, to reflect God's glory. **But in our sinful, fallen state, we're like bent and broken mirrors—curved in on ourselves—which makes us fall short of the glory of God.** We merely reflect our own glory, unable to see past ourselves.
 - That's been the problem plaguing the disciples. They so want to be great. They're all about chasing after glory. But because they're curved in on themselves, their pursuit of glory can't go past themselves.

- ❖ **Now what I find so striking about how Jesus responds to his disciples is that he doesn't condemn them for seeking greatness—for chasing after glory.** But what he does is to redirect their search.
 - Look at what he says in v43, “*But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.*” We'll look at this more closely in a bit, but just notice how Jesus is not condemning their desire to be great. He actually affirms it, but at the same time he redirects them away from their natural bent.
 - **You see, as fallen creatures, our natural bent is curved in on ourselves, so we end up chasing after glory and greatness by grabbing for power and position.** We're convinced that it's found in privilege and rank.

- ❖ **Leonard Bernstein**, the famous conductor of the New York Philharmonic, was once asked which instrument was the hardest to play. The interviewer was expecting him to compare the difficulty of mastering the violin versus the cello versus maybe a woodwind. But Bernstein replied without hesitation. **He said the hardest instrument to play is second violin.**
 - It's not because the instrument is any different from the first violins. But it's because no one wants to play second fiddle. Everyone wants the higher rank. Everyone wants to sit in the higher chair. It's all about power and position.

- ❖ **What Jesus does, in this morning’s passage, is to reshape our concave hearts—so curved inwardly—into convex hearts that curve outwardly towards others.** The way God intended when he made us in his image.
 - **My point is that you were created to seek glory and desire greatness.** That ambition that drives you to live a life that matters—that longing you have to hear the words “well done”—those are all God-given desires. **Your ambitions don’t have to be repressed. They need to be redeemed.**
 - And that’s exactly what Jesus came to do. He came to show us, through his life and death, that the pursuit of glory and greatness is not by grabbing for position and power but by giving it up in service to others. **He came to show us that there’s another way—a godly way—to chase after glory.**
- ❖ That’s what I want us to see from this passage. We’ll need to clarify between worldly ambition and godly ambition. (1) Worldly ambition desires to be seen as great by others. (2) Godly ambition desires to be great at serving others. And when our ambitions are finally redeemed, then (3) What we desire is—not to be seen as great—but to see true Greatness.

Worldly Ambition Desires to be Seen as Great by Others

- ❖ Let’s begin by considering what worldly ambition looks like. It’s perfectly exemplified by James and John. **It’s a desire to be seen as great in the eyes of others.** Now before we look at their conversation with Jesus, remember he makes his third passion prediction starting in v32. And once again, after foretelling his death and resurrection, his disciples fail to grasp that he’s leading them on a path of suffering, not a path of victory.
- ❖ **It says they were filled with amazement.** His disciples were amazed as he walks ahead of them, on the road to Jerusalem, leading what they expect to be a political insurrection. It says the crowds following were less confident. They were afraid of the likely opposition from the Roman authorities, who were infamous for aggressively stamping out any hints of rebellion.
 - But his disciples were entertaining these grandiose ideas of Jesus going up to the royal city to establish his messianic kingdom. **So James and John see this as a perfect opportunity for personal advancement.** They pull Jesus aside and have the gall to ask him to do for them whatever they ask of him.
- ❖ Jesus asks them, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Look at v37, “*And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’*” They were probably picturing that great banquet Jesus often spoke of—to be enjoyed in his coming kingdom—and the seats of honor at the right and left of the King. They wanted those seats.
 - **Of course, the irony is that, by the end of Mark’s Gospel, there will be someone at his right hand and at his left.** And it will be in a moment of unforeseen glory. **But Jesus will be hanging on a cross.** That’s what he alludes to in v38. Look there, “*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?*”” The rhetorical answer is “no” because the images of the cup and the baptism are references to Jesus’ suffering and death that awaits him in Jerusalem.

- ❖ **In the OT, the imagery of a cup of wine was used to symbolize the wrath of God being poured out in judgment on sin** (Ps 75:80. Jesus is planning to drink that cup. He plans to die a sacrificial death where he drinks the cup of God's wrath in the place of guilty sinners.
 - **And the baptism is also a reference his impending death** (Lk 12:50). His death on the cross is a baptism of sorts since it'll involve going down in death and being raised up in newness of life. That's something he'll have to experience alone. It belongs to his unique mission as the Messiah.

- ❖ Yet the brothers quickly answer, "*We are able.*" **Their pride is evidenced by their failure to recognize the vast difference between them and their Messiah.** There are certain things they cannot do that only Jesus can do for them, namely to give his life as a ransom.
 - Now in v39 Jesus replies that, in one sense, they will drink the cup he drinks and be baptized with his baptism. But the reference points are different. The cup and the baptism in Jesus's case refer to his passion. But when applied to the brothers, the images refer to the sufferings that they'll one day go through for his sake.

- ❖ And then in v40 Jesus tells them that "*to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.*" **I think what surprises most readers is that Jesus didn't dispel them of the idea that there will be special seats of honor in the kingdom of God.** You'd think he'd tell James and John, "What are you talking about? There are no special seats of honor in heaven. They're all the same. Everyday I'll move around and take a new seat, so everyone will eventually get the opportunity to sit at my right and at my left. Everyone gets the same experience." That's what we expect to hear.

- ❖ But that's not what Jesus says. **He actually acknowledges the existence of two special seats of honor.** Now he won't promise James and John that they'll be sitting in those seats. But the staggering truth is that somebody will be! The Father has prepared that right and left seat for two particular believers. You might think it's reserved for Moses and Elijah since we saw them flanking Jesus earlier on the Mount of Transfiguration.
 - Or maybe it'll be Peter and Paul since they seem so influential in the early church. Who knows? **I wouldn't be surprised if it ends up being two believers we've never heard of.** But once we get there and hear their stories of faithfulness to Christ and his gospel, then we'll be happy for them. We will have been so conformed to the likeness of Christ that it won't bother us one bit that they're not our seats.

- ❖ But the fact that such seats even exist supports the point I made earlier. **That this hard-wired desire for glory and greatness inside each of us is not necessarily a bad thing.** In its purest form, it's a good thing, a God-given thing.
 - But the question is: **How are you trying to attain it?** Romans 2:7 says that "*those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, [God] will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking ... there will be wrath and fury.*"

- ❖ Apparently there is a commendable way to seek for glory. In a way that would not be described as self-seeking. **There's a difference between seeking glory and seeking to glorify yourself.** So James and John were not wrong for desiring glory and greatness.
 - **But because they were curved in on themselves, they couldn't see past themselves.** They were merely seeking to glorify themselves. They were driven by worldly ambition—to be seen as great in the eyes of others. Which meant outranking them. Getting ahead of them. Surpassing other people in position and power.

- ❖ That's what the other disciples were also thinking. Keep reading in v41, "*And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.*" So the other ten disciples get word of the brothers' self-serving plot and they're livid. They're indignant. **Probably not because the two brothers dared to ask for such a thing, but because they got to Jesus first.**
 - So Jesus calls them. Look at v42, "*And Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.'*" In other words, by jostling for power and position, you're acting like the Romans you so despise. The Gentile rulers "lord" their authority over you. They pull rank and throw their weight around. **They exercise authority in such a way to make you feel so small while they look so great.**

- ❖ That's what worldly ambition is after—to look great in the eyes of others. "*But it shall not be so among you.*" Those are Jesus's words to his disciples in v43. Don't adopt the world's version of ambition. **That curved-in, self-serving attitude is not the only way to pursue greatness.** Many of us were raised in a culture where we were conditioned to pursue the highest achievement in our studies, in our hobbies, in our profession. **But when we came to faith in Jesus it felt, at first, like we had to humble ourselves.** Which amounted to curbing our ambitions. Suppressing that desire to be great.

- ❖ I hope what Jesus has to say is convicting. **Especially if you're being driven by an ambition to be great in order to look great in the eyes of others.** If your ambition is still curved in on yourself, then this passage should convict you.
 - But I also hope what Jesus says encourages you. As you realize that God's not asking you to suppress your ambition. It's a lot like what C.S. Lewis said about humility. It's not about thinking less of yourself. It's about thinking of yourself less. **In the same way, it's not about being less ambitious. It's about making it less about yourself.** Ambition is not to be rejected. But to be redeemed and reoriented in the right direction. Away from yourself and towards others.

Godly Ambition Desires to be Great at Serving Others

- ❖ That leads to our second point and definition of godly ambition. **Godly ambition desires to be great—particularly great at serving others.** Listen to how Jesus recovers the true meaning of greatness. Look at v43, "*⁴³But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*" **Jesus reverses the world's categories for greatness.** The world only knows greatness in terms of position and rank. But Jesus speaks of greatness in terms of service.

- ❖ I was just on a cruise. And each evening, my family took advantage of the fine dining option where you're served a fancy three-course meal. One night, I noticed a group seated in the large center table, which on prior nights remained empty. So that was curious. And then suddenly, waiters began closing off the area with a curtain that you could barely see through.
 - I was like, "Woah, what's going on there?" I was told that that group that evening was dining with the captain of the ship. They were seated at the VIP table with a VIP guest, probably enjoying a special VIP menu. **Every time I walked by, I tried to peer through the curtain to get a glimpse of one of those great passengers who gets to dine with the great captain of the ship.** I never got a clear view of them.

- ❖ But according to Jesus, I had my eyes on the wrong people. **The great ones were in plain sight, all night long, going in and out of that curtained off area.** They were the table waiters. I had overlooked them. "*But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.*" The word "*servant*" is the Greek word *diakonos*. It's where we get the term deacon. In the Greek, it refers to a table waiter.
 - In Acts 6, that's exactly what the first deacons in the early church were appointed to do. They waited on tables for widows in the church. **Jesus is opening our blind eyes to see that true greatness doesn't belong to the one who has many servants. But to the one who willingly and humbly serves.**

- ❖ But here's where we need some nuance. **Because if that's true—if servants are the greatest in God's kingdom—I think most people don't know how to square *that* with their innate desire for achievement and success in their pursuits.** If a table waiter is the greatest, then why am I working so hard to get that degree or to succeed in my profession? **It sounds like faithfulness to Christ calls for me to soften my ambitions and to lower my life goals.** It feels unchristian to want to be the restaurant manager. I should settle with being the waiter.
 - But that's a conclusion I don't want any of you to draw. That's why I'm saying we should think in terms of a godly ambition. **As a faithful Christian, you can still have ambition and desire to succeed.** And you can obtain to the highest levels of achievement in your field of study or in your profession. It's not about what level you obtain. **It's about what's driving you. It's about what's fueling that ambition.**

- ❖ **I think the difference between worldly and godly ambition was on display between two speeches delivered at the 2009 Basketball Hall of Fame induction ceremony.** Look, I'm of the generation who watched **Michael Jordan** play in his prime, so he's hands-down the GOAT in my book. But it was sad listening to his hall of fame speech.
 - Jordan was being honored with the highest achievement in his sport, but he spent his time revisiting old slights and rehashing old rivalries. He mentioned a lot of people and thanked them, but he was thanking them for being the obstacle or adversary that fueled his own ambition and competitive spirit. **The gist of his message was that he achieved the pinnacle of greatness by a relentless pursuit of proving people wrong.** Jordan is the Greatest of All Time, and yet he spoke like someone still seeking validation in the eyes of others. It was sad.

- ❖ Especially when you contrast his speech with **David Robinson's**. While Jordan focused on proving himself to others. Robinson focused on thanking others. He had only encouraging words for his three sons, his wife, his coaches, and his teammates. He quoted Luke 17 and those ten lepers who were healed by Jesus, and he compared himself to that lowly leper who came back to the Lord to fall on his knees and say thank you. **The gist of his message was that his greatness was achieved by a faithful stewardship of all the love from his family, all the guidance from his coaches, and all the camaraderie from his teammates.**
 - Both men achieved greatness. But for one, his greatness was fueled by a relentless desire to prove himself as great in the eyes of others. The other man was fueled by a desire to faithfully steward the love and support others had given him, and to use his greatness as a platform to serve and inspire others, especially his three sons. That's the difference between worldly ambition and godly ambition.

- ❖ **I hope you see is that God is *not* asking you to lower your goals or to pull back your ambition.** You can aim for greatness. Go ahead and strive to be—not the table waiter—but the restaurant manager or the owner. **But a manager or owner fueled by godly ambition will desire to be great at serving others.** Including your customers and your wait staff.
 - So go ahead and strive to be great in your field, to be great in your profession. Just be fueled by a godly ambition that doesn't treat others as competitors to beat or obstacles to overcome. But instead recognizes that other people— your parents, your teachers, your classmates, your supervisors, your colleagues—they're all gifts from God.
 - They have all, in their own way, been used by God to bless you and prop you up to reach that pinnacle of success. **To be in a position of greatness that provides a platform for you to turn around and serve others.** To be that same blessing and support for others.

- ❖ That's how Jesus pursued greatness while he was on earth. **Whether you believe he's the Son of God or not, you could make a strong case that Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived on earth.** He has been worshipped and revered by the largest number of people in all of human history. The Western calendar is literally organized around his birth, dividing history into BC and AD. His teachings have transformed moral thought, and he's been the inspiration for countless works of art, music, and literature. He's the ultimate GOAT.
 - And yet look at what fueled his ambition towards greatness. Recall how Jesus's argument started in v43, "*But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.*" So given the assumption that we all aspire to greatness, he goes on to say about himself, "*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*"

- ❖ **For even the Son of Man desires greatness. Yet not as one who is greatly served by others but as One who is great at serving others.** That's what godly ambition looks like. And Jesus modeled it for us. He set before us, in his life and ministry, the perfect example. **The posture of the Son of Man was the posture of a servant.** And if we claim to be one of his followers, we need to adopt the same posture. That's what our Christian faith calls for.

- ❖ But here's the rub. If Christianity is just about following Jesus's example, then we're in a bind. **If Jesus had simply come to say, "Do as I have done," we're doomed.** Because there's no way we can imitate Jesus in all his ways. No one has ever served as he served. We're far too curved in on ourselves to achieve that. **If imitating Jesus is simply the message of Christianity, then that would be the worst news ever.**
- ❖ But that's *not* the whole message. That's *not* the gospel. **The good news of the gospel is that Jesus said he came—not only to set a pattern of humble service—but to serve us.** Christianity, at its heart, is *not* about *you* serving Jesus. In fact, Jesus says he refuses your service. He did not come to be served but to serve.
 - Think about that. **In every other religion, the primary message is, "Serve God and you'll be blessed."** Offer him these sacrifices. Give him this amount of time, service, and devotion, and you'll be accepted in his good favor. You'll be saved. But that's not Christianity. **The message of the gospel is to stop trying to serve Jesus.** To stop trying to work for him and to admit that you need him to serve you.
- ❖ And how does he serve you? **Jesus says by giving his life as a ransom.** That word *ransom* means "the price of release." We hear "*ransom*" and think of a price you pay to a kidnapper. But back then the term was used in relation to slavery. In tough economic times, you might forfeit your freedom and sell yourselves into slavery in order to pay off a debt. **So the amount needed to cancel your debt was the ransom price.** It's the price of release.
 - That's exactly what we need. **Before we can follow the Son of Man and adopt the posture of servant, fueled by godly ambition, we need to be served by him in this particular way.** We need to be ransomed. Because of our sinfulness, we owe God a great debt. And Jesus paid it all on the cross.
 - Which not only secured release from our bondage to sin. **When Jesus ransomed us, he transformed us.** From concave sinners curved inwardly on ourselves to convex disciples curved outwardly towards others. So he not only redeemed our soul, he redeemed our ambition.

Redeemed Ambition Desires to See True Greatness

- ❖ Which leads to our last point. Redeemed ambition desire—not to be seen as great—but to see true Greatness. This is where that final scene in chapter 10 stands out. Look back at the text starting in v46. As Jesus was leaving Jericho, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus was sitting by the roadside. *"⁴⁷And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"*"
 - I think Mark meant for this episode to be ironic. **Apparently the only one who can see Jesus for who he really is as the Messiah, the Son of David, is a blind beggar.** He can see more clearly than the disciples. But instead of helping him to Jesus, people try to silence him. They assume someone great like the Messiah wouldn't want to be bothered by so lowly a person. They don't understand kingdom greatness. They don't understand that Jesus came to serve the lowly.

- ❖ Jesus goes on to call him, and they bring Bartimaeus to him. And notably, Jesus asks him the exact same question he asked James and John earlier. Look at v51, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” **The brothers wanted to sit on seats of honor and bask in glory. Bartimaeus wants to see—to see Jesus’s glory.** Look at the text, “*And the blind man said to him, ‘Rabbi, let me recover my sight.’*”
 - The text goes on to say that Bartimaeus immediately recovered his sight and followed Jesus on the way. **James and John want to be seen as great. Bartimaeus wants to see true Greatness.** He just wants to see the Great One.

- ❖ Friends, chapter 10 ends this way because it wants us to ask ourselves that same diagnostic question: **What do you want Jesus to do for you?** Do you want him to help you become great? In your academic pursuits? In your career aspirations? Do you want him to help you achieve the pinnacle of success? To be recognized as being the best? **But the problem is that if you’re still curved in on yourself, you’ll never be satisfied.** It’ll never be enough.
 - It all goes back to what we said earlier. **You were created to seek glory, but you weren’t created to glorify yourself.** The goal was never for you to bask in your own glory and greatness. You were given ambition so you would seek out God—to see and savor *his* glory and *his* greatness. That ambition of yours will never be satisfied—you’ll never be able to rest—until you find your rest in him.
 - So go ahead and be ambitious—but be ambitious to seek first the glory of the King and his kingdom and all these things will be added to you.