

**“Power, Domination, and Service”**  
**Mark 10:32-45**  
**April 6, 2025**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

We return this morning to the Gospel of Mark. As Jesus continues on the road to Jerusalem, where suffering and the cross await him, he also continues to teach his disciples about what it means to follow him.

With that in mind, we turn now to Mark 10:32-45.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

<sup>10:32</sup> And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”

<sup>35</sup> And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” <sup>36</sup> And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” <sup>37</sup> And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” <sup>38</sup> 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?” <sup>39</sup> And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, <sup>40</sup> but 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.” <sup>41</sup> And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. <sup>42</sup> 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. <sup>43</sup> But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

## **Prayer of Illumination**

Lord, you are our hiding place and our shield,  
we hope in your word.  
Help us to turn from all false ways,  
and keep instead your commandments, for you are our God.  
We know we will one day stand before you and give an account,  
and so, with that in mind, help us now to attend to your word.  
Grant this in Jesus's name. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:114-117, 120]

## **Introduction**

We come, a third time in Mark, to Jesus predicting his death and resurrection and then relating that teaching to what it means to follow him.

Next week, we'll look at the prediction itself. This morning we'll focus on Jesus's discussion with James and John and then the other disciples – a discussion that ultimately focuses on the topic of power.

And what we see in this interaction is that we want power for self-serving reasons, but Jesus uses his power to serve us, and so, if we would follow Jesus, we too must use our power to be servants of all.

Let me say that again: We want power for self-serving reasons, but Jesus uses his power to serve us, and so, if we would follow Jesus, we too must use our power to be servants of all.

Let's break that down.

## **We Want Power for Self-Serving Reasons**

The first thing we see here is that we want power for self-serving reasons.

James and John approach Jesus with a request here. They say to him in verse 36: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

James and John are asking for a high position in Jesus's kingdom – positions that would include first power: they're essentially asking for top positions in Jesus's cabinet [Keller, 159], as well as positions of glory; they're also asking for special places of honor at Jesus's kingly banquet table. [Ferguson, 159]

As Jesus brings his Kingdom to bear, they are focused on establishing roles of power and glory for themselves. Specifically, they try to out-manuever the other ten disciples for these top positions. [Edwards, 321]

And why do James and John want this power – why do they make this request? Well, Jesus tells us in verse 42: they want this power for self-serving ends: for their own glory and comfort, and also for the ability to dominate others.

And the other disciples realize this – that’s why they respond with indignation in verse 41 ... which also reveals that they too have the same desires and ambitions for power and glory. [Ferguson, 173]

Jesus compares the attitudes of James and John – and really of all 12 of the disciples – to the Gentiles: the pagans. He says in verse 42 that the “rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.”

That phrase, translated as “lord it over them,” means “to gain mastery or power over others,” “to subdue,” and “to function as a despot.” [Edwards, 325] It means to dominate others.

This is what the disciples want.

And that’s a problem.

As commentator Mark Horne writes: “The disciples, like the Pharisees, have received their ideas about rule and power from the Gentiles. They affirm that God is a great King but then get their ideas about kingliness from Caesar and Herod. Even though they hate those rulers, they have received their fundamental assumptions about what it means to rule from them.” [Horne, 145]

And this is important. You see, when it came to power, the Pharisees and the disciples thought of themselves as countercultural in the Gentile world. The Gentiles proclaimed that Caesar was Lord. But the Pharisees and other Jews, in defiance of the pagan world around them, proclaimed that Yahweh – the God of the Hebrew Scriptures – was Lord. They seemed to be set directly against the pagan world around them.

And yet ... Jesus here reveals that they weren’t really. Because they’d quietly and unknowingly adopted the pagan world’s beliefs about what it even means to be Lord – to be King. They’d turned their conception of Yahweh’s kingship into a pagan kingship – a pagan-style of authority. Which is why, when Yahweh actually showed up in the flesh among them ... they didn’t even recognize him. Because they expected Yahweh to come as a King who exercised authority like the Gentile rulers.

This is the error that the Pharisees, the Zealots ... and at this moment even the disciples made.

And it’s an error we can fall into as well.

We live in an unbelieving culture that has often been very anti-authoritarian. And so Christians, who believe God has established roles of authority in the world, can feel very counter-cultural.

But then, we too, like the Pharisees, like the Zealots, like the disciples in our text – we too can often adopt and even assume pagan, secular, and unbelieving models of what power and authority even mean. And so we conform to the unbelieving culture at the very point we think we’re opposing it.

We may declare that we're being biblical ... but Jesus here reveals that we're often exercising and championing pagan models of authority – self-serving uses of power.

That can be true for those of us with formal roles of authority, whether in the power structures of the world, or in our workplace, or in the church, or in our homes.

It's also true for those whose power is more informal or organic: those who have social or relational influence over others, those who have intellectual or physical or social or creative strengths that give them a measure of power or influence over others, even if they don't have a formal role of authority.

It's also true for those who have no power at all ... but who long for such power – who daydream about what they'd do if they had a bit more power or influence ... just like James and John in our text. You obviously don't need to have power or authority to fall into the error they did, because they didn't have much power or authority in the world when they did it.

But where do you have power right now, whether formal or informal – big or small? Whether it's over a military unit, or a single employee, whether it's over a child at home or a younger sibling, whether it's formally over an entire group, or informally over one friend – we all have some level of power in life. And many of us dream of having more. What does that look like for you?

And then, in those relationships, do you see the ways that you use, or want to use, that power in self-serving ways?

Do you maybe see, tied up in it all, a desire to dominate other people – to see people jump at your direction, to see them work to please you, to see them serve your goals and your ends, to fear disappointing you, and for them to put your desires and wellbeing above their own?

How do you use, or desire to use, power to dominate others?

Or maybe for you it's not about domination so much as about insulation.

You desire power, not to impose it on others as much as to make yourself autonomous from others – to make it so that no one else can make demands or lay a claim on you.

But this too is a self-serving use of power.

In most of our lives, there are many other people who each have a claim on us in different ways. Some may be family obligations. Others may be work obligations. Others may be financial obligations, or church obligations, and so on. But what you want is power to free you from those obligations. You long for power that would make it so that no one else had a claim on you, or your time, or your effort, or your money. You don't want power to dominate others ... you want power to be free from others.

The expression of how you'd like to use power may look very different. But at its root it's actually the same. We want power for self-serving reasons. We want power so that we can use it for ourselves.

But neither the desire to dominate others, nor the desire to insulate ourselves from others, are Christian views of what power is for. They are instead pagan, unbelieving, models of power.

What we see here first is that we all want power for self-serving reasons, whether to dominate others, or insulate ourselves from others.

That's the first thing we see here.

### **But Jesus Uses His Power to Serve Us**

But the next thing we see is that Jesus uses his power to serve us.

Because at the beginning of this story, in verses 32-34, Jesus starts by predicting that when he gets to Jerusalem, he will die on the cross for the sake of his people.

Now this is the third time Jesus has told this to his disciples – and he's been saying it to them plainly. [Mark 8:32; Keller, 158] But James and John's question shows just how much they – and often we – miss the full force of these predictions. One commentator writes: "James and John want to turn Jesus' messianic journey to Jerusalem into a march to glory [...] They have clearly heard all the language about suffering, death, and rising again simply as a set of pictures, perhaps meaning 'It's going to be tough, but we're going to come out on top.' But the cross is not, for Jesus or for Mark, a difficult episode to be got through on the way to a happy ending. [Rather, the cross] is precisely God's way of standing worldly power and authority on its head. When, at the end of this passage, Jesus quotes the servant song ([saying that he has come] 'to give his life as a ransom for many'), he is making the point [...] that the kingdom of God turns the world's ideas of power and glory upside down." [Wright, 140]

The cross wasn't a bump in the road for Jesus. It was at the heart of what he came to do. It wasn't despite the cross that Jesus was carrying out his Kingly role; it was through the cross that Jesus would carry out his Kingly role. In the cross, Jesus exemplified what it meant for him to be a King.

And it meant taking the form of a servant, to give his life on their behalf. [Edwards, 322-323; Ferguson, 173; Keller, 160]

Jesus sums it up in verse 45, by saying of himself: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

In his incarnation, Jesus shows us how he uses his power and authority over us: he uses it to serve us. Though we don't in any way deserve it, though we were so far beneath him, though we had sinned against him, still, he made himself a servant and a slave, in order to serve and to save us.

That's how Jesus uses his power in his time on earth: to serve us – to serve the lowly and the undeserving.

And it's how he continues to use his power even now, as he reigns in heaven.

Even in heaven, the Book of Hebrews tells us, Jesus always lives to make intercession for us [7:25] The Apostle John tells us that even now, Jesus serves us in heaven as our Advocate [1 John 2:1].

The Apostle Paul tells us that God serves us from his throne, working all things together for our good. [Romans 8:28]

Even now, even from heaven, even in glory, Jesus uses his power to serve you.

Where we so often want to use power in self-serving ways, Jesus uses his power to serve us ... not to dominate us, or to insulate himself from us.

That's the shocking revelation and reminder of this passage: While we want to use power in self-serving ways, Jesus uses his power to serve us.

### **And So, If We Would Follow Jesus**

Which brings us to the question of what it means, then, for us to follow Jesus.

To be a Christian means to be one whom Jesus has ransomed with his blood – one whom Jesus has saved by grace, as we see in verse 45.

But at the very same time, to be a Christian also means to be one who follows Jesus.

And we get a dramatic picture of this in verse 32, where Jesus is marching towards Jerusalem – towards sacrificial service for others ... and his disciples follow behind him ... but with amazement and with fear.

That picture is a helpful reminder for us that while following Jesus is in a sense the safest and most secure place we can be – if we're really doing it, it can still be perplexing and scary.

Because as Jesus leads us, and as he directs us, and as he models for us how we are to live [Edwards, 318, 326; Ferguson, 174] ... often what he calls us to is not really what we had in mind for our lives.

And one area that plays out is in the use of power. As followers of Jesus, we're not supposed to follow the models of this world – we're not supposed to follow the model of Caesar or of Herod. We're not supposed to take a pagan form of power and authority and leadership and just fill that form in with Christian content. No – both the content and the form must be based on Jesus – modeled on Jesus.

And so, our model for leadership, or power, or authority, cannot come from the secular world – whether progressive or conservative, whether therapeutic or self-reliant, whether elitist or populist.

As Christians, if we really follow Jesus, and if we really believe that Jesus is the supreme King of the universe, then our model, our ideal, of how power should be used must come from him.

### **We Too Must Use Our Power to Be Servants of All**

Which brings us to our last point: That Jesus here calls us to use our power to be servants of all.

In verses 42-45 Jesus says to his disciples: “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.”

The disciples needed this lesson. But if they needed it, then so do we. [Keller, 160-161]

How are you failing to use your power to serve others? How are you failing to make yourself a willing slave for the good of those the Lord has put in your life?

We may recoil at that concept ... but it's important to remember that the disciples would have recoiled at it as well. They didn't want to be slaves either.

And yet Jesus says that we are to be like slaves in that we use our power – whether formal or informal, big or small – we are to use our power not to serve ourselves, but to serve others. Because that's what Jesus did for us. [Edwards, 326]

What does that then mean for you?

Now, we should be clear that it doesn't mean that Christians are supposed to be pushovers without backbones. Jesus wasn't a pushover. He certainly had a backbone. It doesn't mean that Christians shouldn't speak or act with the authority God has given them – again, Jesus spoke with authority and used the power he was given by God the Father. It also doesn't mean that Christians don't do things that those under their authority won't like – Jesus said and did many things that those under his authority would have preferred he do differently.

Using power as a servant of all didn't mean those things for Jesus.

Rather, it meant that when he used that power, when he exercised that authority, even when he contradicted the will of others, he always, always acted for their good, and not for himself. He always used his power to serve others, not to serve himself ... whether they recognized that or not.

Which means that if we follow Jesus, we need to use whatever leadership or power or authority or influence the Lord has given us in the same way.

Which really is counter-cultural.

Because while the world says that power and authority and leadership are prizes to be enjoyed, Jesus says that power and authority and leadership are burdens to be taken up in order to serve others. [Lencioni, “Introduction” and “The Two Motives”]

How have you pursued and used power and authority wrongly? And where is Jesus calling you to repent and to follow him more faithfully in this area?

Take an inventory of your life and where you have power. How do you tend to use it? Because this has implications for you everywhere.

This plays out first in our families. In your family relationships, you have different types of power, whether as a husband or a wife, a mother or a father, a parent or a child, a brother or a sister. How do you use your power? Is it to serve others or to demand that they serve you? Is it to help others or to keep them at a distance?

These concepts also apply to friendships, where power dynamics often play out in subtle or overt ways. Whether it's superior resources, or social standing, or abilities that you have, how do you use your power and strength in your friendships? Is it in self-serving ways, or by acting as a loving servant to your friends?

If you have power or authority at work, how do you use it? To bless your co-workers, or to dominate and lord it over them?

In the church, do you primarily seek to be a servant of others, looking for opportunities where you can bless others, and serve others, and come alongside others as you're able ... or do you primarily expect others in the church to serve and cater to you?

This teaching on the proper use of power should have an effect on every area of our lives.

And that includes our politics as well.

Now, we should not expect pagan political leaders to act in Christian ways any more than the disciples should have expected Caesar to act in Christian ways.

But at the same time, we must not let pagan leaders infect and shape how we, as Christians, believe political power should be used.

Political power is not outside of God's kingdom or concern – God wants political power to be used in service of others ... not in self-serving ways. And as Christians, we are to believe the same thing, and we are to say the same thing, and we are to advocate for the same thing ... and we are to oppose the pagan, self-serving, and dominating use of political power.

And I'm not talking about other people here. I'm talking about us, right here; me and you.

We're to remember that, as Christians, we are not immune from falling into pagan and worldly approaches to political power.

Because it's happened throughout church history. And sometimes in shocking and extreme ways.

A few years ago, Ralph Allen Smith, a conservative evangelical pastor wrote an article on the widespread support for the Third Reich that could be found among German Christians in the 1930s.

We like to talk about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his resistance of Hitler and Nazism. But the truth is that Bonhoeffer was an outlier among German Christians.

Of course, there was nominalism and unbelief in Germany at the time. But Smith points out that Hitler mostly won over more devout Catholics and Protestants as well. Even some members of the "Confessing Church" – "the most openly evangelical Christians of the time" — took an ambivalent or even a positive attitude toward Nazi rule.

“Christian compromise with Nazi Germany’s political leadership is well documented in painful detail,” Smith writes. “There was resistance, but it was the exception rather than the rule. [...] Christians in Germany — Protestants even more than Catholics — not only cooperated with the Third Reich, but a large percentage also even celebrated it.”

As scholar Robert Gellately puts it: “We have come to realize with growing empirical certainty that many Christians of the day believed Nazism to be in some sense a Christian movement. Even in the later years of the Third Reich, as anticlerical hostility grew, churchmen of both confessions [Catholic and Protestant] persisted in their belief that Nazism was essentially in conformity with Christian precepts.”

And Christian support of Nazism often included their “cooperated when it came to enforcing antisemitism and the racial measures aimed at foreign workers” – even extending to their opposing Jewish neighbors who had converted to Christianity – their own brothers and sisters in Christ.

Smith writes: “For the most part, Christians in Nazi Germany bought into the propaganda. They were complicit in the holocaust.”

To us, it would seem that the Nazi’s use of power, and Jesus’s use of power, could not be much farther from each other. And yet, Christians in Germany in the 1930s adopted a Nazi view of power and even convinced themselves that it was Christian. They let the surrounding pagans shape their view of the proper use of political power, more than the Bible.

And if past Christians have fallen into it to such extremes without even realizing it, then we too must be on guard against the temptation to adopt worldly models for how to use political power and then just sprinkle a little Christian content on top of it to call it “Christian.”

Both the secular left and the secular right of our culture have pagan views of political power, as power to be used to lord it over others, to subject others, to dominate others.

Christians must avoid the temptation to flee to either one. Christians must resist the temptation to let either secular movement right now shape our view of what power is for and how it should be used.

Jesus reigns over the universe. And he tells us that in his world, under his reign, power must not be used in self-serving ways in any sphere of life. Power must be used to serve others. Anything else is pagan. And Christians, whether their political leanings are to the right, the left, or the center, need to have the courage and the faith to call such pagan uses of power out, not only when it comes to their political opponents, but also when it comes to their political allies.

We should expect conflict with non-Christians in this area – both on the right and on the left. Because Jesus’s calling for the use of power turns the ways of the world upside down. [Edwards, 326]

## **Conclusion**

Now, some hearing this will hear it as a call for Christians to give up on influencing the world – to give up on influencing the culture or the people around us.

But it's not that at all. It's actually the opposite.

Because service and sacrificial love are how God changes hearts, and families, and communities, and even whole societies.

Jesus came to change the world. And for that very reason, he came as a servant who used his power to sacrificially serve and ransom others.

And if we truly want to change people's hearts and lives – if we truly want to influence society in deep and meaningful ways – then we will follow in Jesus's footsteps.

Tim Keller, summarizing what God is saying to us in this passage writes this: “‘For you,’ God says, ‘the route to gaining influence is not taking power. Influence gained through power and control doesn’t really change society; it doesn’t change hearts. I’m calling you to a totally different approach. Be so sacrificially loving that the people around you, who don’t believe what you believe, will soon be unable to imagine the place without you. They’ll trust you because they see that you’re not only out for yourself, but out for them, too. When they voluntarily begin to look up to you because of the attractiveness of your service and love, you’ll have real influence. It will be an influence given to you by others, not taken by you from others.’” Keller continues, “Who is the model for that way of gaining influence? It’s Jesus himself of course. How did he respond to his enemies? He didn’t call down legions of angels to fight them. He died for their sins, and as he was dying he prayed for them. And if at the very heart of your worldview is a man dying for his enemies, then the way you’re going to win influence in society is through service rather than power and control.” [Keller, 162-163]

Brothers and sisters, may it be so for us, in every area of our lives.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Let's Study Mark*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999.
- Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
- Keller, Timothy. *Jesus the King*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.
- Lencioni, Patrick. *The Motive: Why So Many Leaders Abdicate Their Most Important Responsibilities*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020. [Transcribed from the audiobook.]
- Smith, Ralph Allen. “Evangelicals for Adolf: Christians in Hitler’s Germany.” Theopolis Institute. October 20, 2020. <https://theopolisinstitute.com/evangelicals-for-adolf-christians-in-hitlers-germany/>
- Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree

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