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“But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister” (Mark 10:43).

How to Be Successful

Central Truth: True greatness is to serve, not to be served.

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I want to be a success, don't you? Every person with ambition wants to make a contribution to the world in which he lives. Many faithful servants of God have prayed that He would use them to bless others. There is nothing wrong in the desire for success if the motive is kept right.

Some people want success in their chosen vocation so they can accumulate wealth to spend on themselves. Some want success so they can have authority over other people and control their lives. But, bless God, some people want success so they can serve to the benefit of others.

Jesus taught that there is a paradox in the Christian life: The way up is down! To be a leader, one must become a follower. To be a master, one must remain a servant.

That principle is recognized in the business world today. The company which has the largest volume of business is the one which supplies the needs of the greatest number of people. One automobile dealer advertised, “We crawl under your car more often and get dirtier than any other shop in town.” He meant that his shop rendered more and better service than any other.

A virus which circulates in a sick society is the desire (or expectation) of getting something for nothing. Life does not work that way. The Bible principle is that he who does not work should not eat (II Thessalonians 3:10). No one has a right to receive unless he gives.

I. AMBITION (Mark 10:35-40)

Ambition is appropriate as long as it is controlled by good motives. James and John were not so controlled when they came to Jesus with a request for special positions in His kingdom.

Ambition in man is often an indication of misunderstanding the Lord. Jesus had just been speaking to the disciples of His humiliation and suffering (Mark 9:32-34). James and John soon afterward spoke to Jesus a request for their exaltation and honor. How they misunderstood Him! He was on the way to Jerusalem to be crucified, and they wanted assurances of seats of high authority in His kingdom of glory. It was as Luke recorded, *“They understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken”* (Luke 18:34).

Ambition is often based on a misunderstanding of God's schedule of events. All of the apostles were sure they were approaching a climactic event in their ministry with Jesus. *“They thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear”* (Luke 19:11). Jesus gave the parable of the ten pounds (Luke 19:12-27) to enable them to understand, but they did not. The idea of a Messiah who would die and rise again was so far from their understanding and expectation that they could not comprehend it even when Jesus spoke plainly to them of it.

And yet, ambition can be an expression of faith. Jesus spoke to them of dying; they kept looking for a kingdom. They did not understand His teaching, but they were convinced of His person. They testified with certainty, *“We believe and are sure that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (John 6:69). The many things they did not know were passed over because of their assurance about the matter of greatest certainty.

Ambition can be encouraged by privileged circumstances. Why was it James and John, not two other of the disciples, who asked for a special position in the kingdom? (1) They were encouraged by their mother to make the request (Matthew 20:20, 21). (2) They were members of the inmost circle (with Peter) of the apostles (Mark 5:37; 9:2; cf. 14:33). (3) They were from a wealthy family and more privileged than some other disciples (Mark 1:20). (4) They may have been relatives of Jesus, perhaps cousins, since their mother seems to have been a sister to the mother of Jesus (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25). (5) They were naturally outspoken and aggressive (as indicated by their “Sons of Thunder” nickname Jesus gave them), and so had the courage to ask.

Ambition must be challenged by discipline. Jesus asked the brothers, “Can you drink the cup I will drink? Can you be immersed, overwhelmed, in the experience which I will soon undergo?” They replied, “We can.”

Let every person remember that the way to victory is the way of battle.

There is no crown without a cross. Jesus taught that those who hold high positions in His kingdom must pay the price by active participation in sufferings — drink the cup — and by passive endurance of the trials — be baptized with the baptism. (Baptism here does not refer to the water baptism in which one confesses his faith in Christ, but to being overwhelmed by any experience of life.) Active and passive participation in the life and sufferings of Christ is demanded of one who would be exalted in His kingdom glory.

James and John did not realize at the time what was ahead for them. They did drink His cup and undergo His baptism in suffering. James was beheaded by Herod in Jerusalem for the witness of Jesus (Acts 12:2). John suffered banishment to the Isle of Patmos (Revelation 1:9) because of Him. Did they indeed inherit the high positions they desired?

Ambition is always subject to the sovereign will of God. Jesus said He was not free to pass out high offices in His kingdom (Mark 10:40). That was reserved by the Father (Matthew 20:23) to give to whom He would. Those appointments cannot be altered by man, not even by the Messiah. Doubtlessly, God has reserved the highest places in His kingdom to those who have served Him most faithfully.

II. CONFLICT (Mark 10:41)

Ambition often becomes the cause of conflict among the people of God. The ten apostles are filled with anger when they hear the request of the two. Their anger is not that the brethren thoughtlessly and selfishly intruded into the burden of the Lord by their request. The anger was that they wanted the very thing James and John had asked to receive, so perhaps the brothers were ahead of them in appointments for the kingdom. They were indignant at the fault of James and John because they had the same faults in themselves. The old controversy of who would be the greatest sprang up again.

Jealous ambition, which is worldly and unspiritual ambition, could have broken the fellowship of the apostolic band at the time when they needed it most, as the crucifixion was approaching. The issue did not die with the discussion Jesus gave them on this occasion. As late as the Passover meal in the upper room, on the night of Jesus' betrayal, they were still discussing who would be greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22:24-30). Jealous ambition dies slowly.

The disciples had not learned the lesson of humility which Jesus taught them (Mark 9:35-37). It is the humble spirit of a little child, not the demanding spirit of a dictator, that marks the true disciple of Christ.

Jesus knows man's frailty and deals gently with those who err. Their fuss over who would be greatest was followed by the quiet example of a child. Another fuss was countered by an example from the way unbelievers act as compared with the servants of God. Yet another fuss was ended with His act of washing their feet, the task of the lowest servant in the household. Oh, that men would leave vain ambition to serve one another in the spirit of Jesus!

III. EXPLANATION (Mark 10:42-45)

A. Greatness of power is sought by unspiritual men (verse 42). Jesus called the disciples to himself and said, “You know that those who are recognized as governing and are supposed to rule the Gentile nations lord it over them — ruling with absolute power, holding them in subjection — and their great men exercise authority and dominion over them.” That is the mark of men who do not know the true God or who, knowing Him, are not submitted to His authority. Surely the people of God will not identify themselves with such unbelievers by imitating their spirit and following their practices, would they?

The people of God must be marked by a different spirit. “This is not to be so among you,” Jesus commanded. If one aspires to greatness, let it be in the extent of service he can render. Unbelievers rule one another with pretense that they are truly interested in the welfare of the people they govern (Luke 22:25). They call themselves by titles like “Benefactor, Protector, Liberator, Leader, etc.” as books and monuments indicate. The truth is, however, that they “lord it down on” those they pretend to serve (the literal translation of “exercise lordship” in verse 42). It is power, not service, in which the unspiritual monarch rules.

Note the contrast between the kingdoms of men and the kingdom of God. Among men, it is power which is stressed. Before God, service receives the emphasis. Men ask, “How many people can I control? On how many can I impose my will?” God's people ask, “Whom may I serve? How many people may I help?” The contrast is great. The two kingdoms are opposite.

B. True greatness is in serving, not in being served (verses 43, 44). Jesus said, “Whoever desires to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be most important and first in rank among you must be the slave of all.” The greatest people in the world are the ones who serve the best.

Picture a pyramid made up of people. The world says the greatest man

is the one on the very top of the pyramid, under whom all the people are gathered. Then turn that pyramid over and set it on its pinnacle. God says the greatest man is the one on whom the whole pyramid rests and who is committed to serving all who are above him. Where do you want to be in such a pyramid?

C. True greatness is illustrated in the person and work of Jesus (verse 45). Mark 10:45 is the key to the entire book of Mark and is one of the most beautiful sentences in all of Holy Scripture: "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." That is the most precious of Christ's sayings, for it best expresses the spirit of His incarnate ministry.

It is a mistake to try to build a system of theology on that verse. Do not get caught up in whether the "ransom" was paid to God or the devil, or whether "many" teaches limited atonement. Look instead to the spirit of the Christ which is reflected here. It is example, not theology, which the Lord underscores.

Jesus Christ came among men, not that they might serve Him but that He might serve them. He came not that they might give their lives for Him, but that He might give His life for them. He is the example for every Christian to follow by seeking to serve rather than to rule.

Selfish ambition is not dead. It rears its ugly head in the private thoughts of the heart. It expresses itself in meetings of a church. It is present when churches assemble by their messengers in an associational meeting. It is here today, as it has been present in every day past. The only way any person can overcome selfish ambition is to kill it, over and again, each time it raises up in the life.

Jesus said, "*Whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all*" (Mark 10:43, 44). Who will obey?

He who follows that principle of service shall know success!

1. How would you define success?
2. What does it mean, "The way up is down"?
3. What light does Luke 19:11 throw on the study?
4. How is ambition to be related to discipline?
5. Why is ambition often the cause of conflict?
6. What kind of greatness do unspiritual men seek?
7. What kind of greatness do spiritual men seek?
8. How did Jesus set an example of greatness?

9. How can you be a great Christian?

10. What practical service can you render this week?