

“Catchin’ & Cleanin’”

“Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all.”

Mark 10:32-45 ¹

When we were in Ghana back in February, we spent our first full day touring Accra, the capital city. One of the places we visited was the seaside village of Jamestown, a shantytown populated by folks whose livelihood is fishing. The background of today’s *PowerPoint* is a view of Jamestown.

It appeared to me that there was a fairly clear division of labor among the folk of Jamestown. For the most part, the men were the sailors who built and maintained the boats and who went to sea to catch the fish, while the women stayed ashore with the children and gutted the fish the men caught to prepare them for sale or for cooking.

Now if you had the option to choose whether you would be a part of the “catchin’” group or the “cleanin’” group, which do you think you might choose? Staying at home and cleaning the fish might be a safer option, but given such a choice, I think I’d choose to go to sea. Going to sea might be more dangerous, but it would also seem to be more glamorous and less nasty.

When thinking about the glamorous parts, Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, was once asked, “What is the hardest instrument in the orchestra to play?” Bernstein didn’t hesitate: “The hardest instrument to play is ‘second fiddle.’ I can always get plenty of first violinists. But to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn, or second flute, now that’s a problem! And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.”²

It seems to be human nature that *everybody wants to be First*. Being second or third or thirty-ninth doesn’t make the paper. James and John were like that, too. They actually were fishermen, so they appear to have spent their time “catchin’” rather than “cleanin’.”

These brothers were so headstrong and ambitious that Jesus nicknamed them “the sons of Thunder”! With Peter, James and John formed the inner circle of the disciples, those whom Jesus allowed to see His heart and His pain and His glory. For all their privilege, though, Peter, James, and John often come off rather poorly in the gospel accounts, and today’s text tells about another such occasion.

Jesus and the Twelve were still on the road to Jerusalem, intending to reach the capital city in time for the observance of Passover. The text appears to indicate that today’s events happened on the same day that had begun with the encounter with the “rich young ruler,” and the disciples and the rest of their entourage were still rather in shock from that conversation.

You’ll remember that after the conversation with the rich man, Jesus had pointed out that “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 19, 2018. Parallel passages include: Matthew 20:17-28; Luke 18:31-33.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

² Ben Patterson, “A Faith like Mary’s,” *Preaching Today*, Tape no. 87.

kingdom of God,” after which the disciples had asked in astonishment, “*Then who can be saved?*” (Mark 10:25-26).

And so, as our text begins, Jesus was walking ahead of the group, with firmness and resolve in every step, while the disciples and the rest followed along behind in confusion and fear. As they walked along, Jesus pulled the Twelve aside from the crowd to tell them, “*See, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death. Then they will hand him over to the Gentiles, and they will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him, and he will rise after three days*” (Mark 10:33-34).

This was now at least the third time that Jesus had warned His disciples about what was coming;³ and, once again, they completely missed the message. Centuries before, Isaiah had clearly foretold that Messiah would suffer for the redemption of the world, but because this message was so counter-intuitive and so opposite to what human perspectives expected and desired, that message had been missed, too.

The way in which God fulfilled the message of the prophets was such a surprise and so offensive to human sensibilities that most of the Jewish people of Jesus’ day rejected that fulfillment and killed Him who fulfilled it. The proclamation of a suffering Savior continues to be offensive, not just to the Jewish people, but also to many of us. We prefer pomp and circumstance, and Jesus’ disciples preferred that, too.

Now if what happened next feels like “*déjà vu* all over again,” it should. Jesus had just been very specific about what was going to happen to Him. He was obviously burdened by what was going to happen in Jerusalem. And James and John sidled up to Jesus as He walked ahead to ask, “*Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask you . . . Allow us to sit at your right and at your left in your glory*” (Mark 10:35-37).⁴

This is another “potato salad” moment, as had already happened in 9:30-37. As we did when we looked at that text, try to imagine that you have just struggled to tell your Sunday School class that you’ve been diagnosed with a dreaded disease and probably have only a few weeks to live. But rather than offer support and prayer, the class president responds, “Oh, that’s nice. Now who’s bringing the potato salad to the class picnic?”

Or imagine that you’ve just tearfully told your mother that you have cancelled your engagement and called off your imminent wedding. But rather than embracing you, she responds, “Oh, that’s nice. Let’s talk about the flowers and the centerpieces.”

That’s pretty much what James and John did to Jesus . . . AGAIN.⁵ Harry Chapin captured this scene nicely in “We Gotta Get Organized,” one of the songs from the Broadway hit, *The Cotton Patch Gospel* . . . (play the MP3).⁶

Jesus had roundly and repeatedly rebuked the spirit of ambition and jealousy in His disciples, but it was obviously still very much alive in them. How discouraging this must have been to Him. The eternal plan of redemption had been committed to these twelve men, and

³ Cp. Mark 8:31, 9:31; Matthew 16:21, 17:9, 22-23, 26:2; Luke 2:35, 5:35, 9:22, 31, 44, 12:50, 13:32, 17:25

⁴ In the short term, at least, two robbers would occupy the places James and John coveted for themselves, and it would not be in glory, so far as human eyes could see.

⁵ This encounter was so embarrassing and humiliating, putting the leading disciples in such a bad light, that Matthew’s account blamed it on their mother, and Luke left it out altogether (Matthew 20:20-21; Luke 18:31-33).

⁶ <https://www.amazon.com/Cotton-Patch-Gospel-Harry-Chapin/dp/B0018P2RXE>

there was no Plan B. He was just days away from crucifixion, and even now, they were still as dense as a teakwood plank!

Yet, despite the gross insensitivity and inappropriateness of the question, Jesus did not rebuke them. He redirected them.

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” He told them. *“Are you able to drink the cup I drink or to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”* (Mark 10:38).

Thinking about some fancy cup at an elegant dining table, they responded, *“We are able.”*

Jesus affirmed that they would indeed drink from the same “cup” and be baptized with the same “baptism,”⁷ terms that they would understand only in retrospect after He had been raised from the dead. And when the other disciples found out what James and John had done, they were furious . . . but not because of the inappropriateness of the request. They were furious because James and John had beaten them to the punch. *They wanted those same seats for themselves.*

There’s a crucial insight not to be missed here. Satan and his minions don’t actually have very many strategies, but the ones they have work frighteningly well, and they are used often. The strategy at work in this scene might be called “sowing disharmony and division.” It’s the same strategy the enemies of freedom are currently using to destroy democracy and deploy demagoguery around the world.

That’s what was going on here, too. If Satan is unable to keep us from faith in Jesus, he often can create such disunity and division among Jesus’ followers that effective Kingdom work grinds to a halt.⁸ That’s why Jesus prayed for these twelve men, a few days later, *“May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me”* (John 17:21).⁹

So, Jesus sat the Twelve down yet again and told them, *“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all. 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”* (Mark 10:42-45).

James and John—and the other ten guys, too—all wanted to be “first.” They wanted to be “the greatest.” And Jesus told them how to achieve that goal: “If you want to be the greatest, you have to be the servant—no, you have to be the *slave*—of everyone else. You have to be willing to give up what is rightfully yours in order to lift up the downtrodden and to set free the oppressed. *Watch what I do, and do those same things after me.*”

⁷ And in so doing, Jesus identified this “cup” not as the cup of God’s wrath against sin, but the cup of suffering. The idea of such a “cup” and such a “baptism” were known in the Old Testament, but they didn’t fit what the disciples were imagining in this moment (cp. Psalm 18:16, 42:7, 69:1-2, 75:8; Isaiah 51:17-18, 22; Jeremiah 25:15-29, 49:12; Ezekiel 23:31-34; 2 Corinthians 11:23-33; Colossians 1:24; Revelation 1:9, 2:10, 14:10, 16:19).

⁸ This was, in fact, the strategy used to destroy the Southern Baptist Convention from 1978-1997, and it is frequently seen in Christian congregations and bodies the world around.

⁹ And in that same prayer, Jesus prayed for us: *“I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word”* (John 17:20).

As He always did, and as He always does, Jesus turned the world's values completely upside down. We are well aware of the common phenomenon that fragile and insecure people frequently present themselves to others as arrogant and boastful. It is only those who are fully secure in who they are who choose to reach down, stoop down, sit down, and give themselves for those of less secure station.

That's what Jesus did. *“Existing in the form of God, [he] did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross”* (Philippians 2:6-8).

You may know those words by heart, and if so, that's good, because this is a Big Deal. But this is a bigger deal than you might imagine. Here's the Real Deal:

God is like Jesus.

God is *exactly* like Jesus.

God has always been exactly like Jesus (John 10:30, 14:9).

We humans think that ruling, not serving, is the Way to Go; but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, and, if we are in Christ, our own Father in Heaven, is not some Jupiter or Zeus heaving lightning bolts from Mount Olympus. The One and Only God, the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of All that Is, is a King, yes, indeed He is. But He is a King who stoops to serve.

God. Is. Exactly. Like. Jesus. Think about that when you look at the stars tonight.

When Jesus told the disciples that He was going to *“give his life as a ransom for many,”* that's exactly what He did. *“No one takes my life from me,”* He said. *“I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again”* (John 10:18).¹⁰

To restate the Main Point of today's text, Jesus told His disciples to “Do what you see me do. Get off your high horses and learn to serve.”

My friends, there is a reason that the wedding vow promises “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health”; and following Jesus is a lot like that. The fact of the matter is that following Jesus generally means more trouble, not less.

True discipleship is characterized by a costly pouring out of one's life for another, whether it be an aging parent, a difficult spouse, a challenging child, one of God's difficult children in the church, or any person whose need God's Spirit moves us to meet in Jesus' Name.

Rather than “The Fellowship of the Ring,” we Christians might well call ourselves “The Fellowship of the Cup.” Every one of us who receives baptism in Jesus' Name is called to follow Him, no matter what is in the “cup.” Somewhat like the (mythical) Knights of the Round Table pledged their allegiance to King Arthur, we who follow Jesus pledge to live and to die by the pattern of the Cross.

¹⁰ *“He was despised,”* Isaiah foretold, *“and we didn't value him. Yet he himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains. The punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. He willingly submitted to death, and was counted among the rebels, yet he bore the sin of many. After his anguish, he will see Light and be satisfied. My righteous Servant will justify many and he will carry their iniquities”* (Isaiah 53:1-12).

Dawson Trotman founded The Navigators, a global discipleship ministry. During a visit to Taiwan, Dawson hiked with a Taiwanese pastor back into one of the mountain villages to meet with some of the national Christians. The roads and trails were wet, and their shoes became very muddy. Later, when someone asked the pastor what he remembered most about Dawson Trotman, the pastor responded, "He cleaned my shoes."

How surprised that pastor must have been when he got up the next morning and realized that the famous Christian leader from America had awakened first and had cleaned the mud from both of their shoes. Such a spirit of servanthood marked Dawson Trotman throughout his life, and he died as he had lived, giving his life to rescue someone else from drowning.¹¹

Yes, we just looked at this idea of true greatness a couple of weeks ago, but that first lesson didn't stick with the disciples, and it doesn't hurt us to hear it again either. When it comes to "being great," Dr. King pointed out that **everybody can be great because anybody can serve:**

"You don't have to have a college degree to serve," he said. "You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don't have to know Plato and Aristotle. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

My friends, God's got a place for you to serve, and God's got a place for me. One of those places is right here in this congregation and in this neighborhood. So here's a quick servanthood check:

- If you didn't help with yesterday's outreach effort in Oakland Mills, you could have, and there will be many more opportunities to touch our neighbors in this community.
- If you didn't sing with the praise chorus this morning, you could have, and probably wish you had, and you could probably join the group at once.
- If you haven't been in a weekly Bible Study class, you could be, and should be, and classes will crank back up a month from now.
- If you haven't been helping with our youth ministries, you could do that, and with our new staff leader coming soon, this is a perfect time to lend your gifts to that world-changing work.
- You get the idea. Nobody can do *everything*, but everybody can do *something*.
- What *are* you doing to be a servant in this place?

My friends, this congregation, Oakland Mills, Columbia, America, and the world will be better places because you and I say together, "I've got my towel. I'm ready to help. I'll do the diapers. I'll sweep the floor. I'll do the dishes. I'll do the catchin', and I'll do the cleanin'. Let's roll!"

¹¹ Jerry Bridges, "Loving By Serving," *Discipleship Journal* (May/June 1985).