JESUS’ SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Mark 10:32-45
Key Verse: 10:45

“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.”

In this passage Jesus teaches what true greatness is, and how to be great. Everyone wants to be great. The root of the desire to be great is not bad. It is part of our God given humanity. As God told Abraham, “I will make your name great” (Gen 12:2), so he wants us to be great. The problem is that many people do not know what true greatness is and how to get it. They only know the worldly greatness of the power hierarchy. They try to seize opportunities to climb the ladder of success. A few people succeed, but most people fail. Many are wounded, hurt and embittered. People are suffering in this hierarchical system. It seems as though there is no way out. But there is. In today’s passage Jesus shows us that anyone and everyone can become great. Let’s learn from Jesus.

First, Jesus was condemned and crucified in our places (32-34). Jesus and his disciples were on their way up to Jerusalem. Jesus was leading the way, the disciples were astonished, and those who followed were afraid (32a). Jesus was aware of his impending suffering and death. No one wants to suffer and die. But Jesus was resolute to obey God’s will. He did not shrink back or turn to the right or to the left. The disciples were astonished by this Jesus. When followers felt the tense atmosphere, they were frightened. Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him (32b). Jesus would be arrested and condemned by the Jewish leaders and turned over to the Gentiles. They would mock him and spit on him and flog him. This would tear the flesh from Jesus’ body, cause profuse bleeding and great pain. Many people died from flogging. Finally, they crucified him. It was the most painful and shameful death devised by mankind. Why did Jesus suffer and die in this way? It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer for our sins (Isa 53:10). “Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering…he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:4-5). Through his suffering and death, our sins are forgiven, and our wounds are healed. But this was not the end. Jesus would rise again on the third day. Defeating the power of death, Jesus would enter his glory and become our Lord and Savior. He liberated us from the fear of death and gave us true peace, freedom and eternal life. He opened the way to the kingdom of God. He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts so that we may be able to live godly and fruitful lives. This is God’s way of salvation. Thank God!
Why did Jesus keep emphasizing his suffering, death and resurrection, even though the disciples did not want to hear about it? He wanted to prepare their minds so that when these things happened they would not go astray. Most importantly, Jesus wanted to plant gospel faith in their hearts. It was essential that the disciples learn the gospel truth. Understanding and proclaiming the gospel would be their primary task. Moreover, they should follow Jesus’ way of life by participating in his suffering. Here we learn how important it is to emphasize the gospel truth. In raising disciples of Jesus, including our children, essential teachings—especially gospel truth—must be repeated. Especially, the gospel of the cross should be repeated, even though it scares people and makes them uncomfortable. Then we can experience God’s glory and the victory of the resurrection.

Second, “For even the Son of Man…” (35-45). As Jesus spoke of this serious event, what were the disciples thinking? James and John came to Jesus and said, “Teacher we want you to do for us whatever we ask” (35). They demanded as if Jesus owed them something. Such a self-centered demand is hard to bear. But Jesus said, “What do you want me to do for you?” (36) Jesus was ready to do whatever would be good for them. Spurred on by Jesus’ generosity, they quickly replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (37).

When Jesus heard this, he must have been surprised at their worldly desire and sneaky method. Yet he was still patient with them. Jesus wanted them to realize that there was a cost to having such a position. Jesus said, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (38) Completely misunderstanding Jesus, they said, “We can.” They were ready to do anything to get what they wanted. Surprisingly, Jesus accepted their answer, however, he could not promise them seats at his right and left; that depended on God’s sovereign will (39-40). When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John (41). It was because they had the same desire for positions. This matter had begun to divide Jesus’ disciples and they were in danger of forming factions. Selfish ambition to become the greatest always begets serious consequences: jealousy, strife, division, hatred, bitterness and dissension. It dishonors God and can destroy the Christian community. That is why Paul said, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (Php 2:3).

How did Jesus deal with this? Instead of being upset, Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach his disciples servant leadership. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them” (42). In the world, to become great means having a position of authority and exercising it from the top down. To do this, one needs a title or position with authority. Then and now, people see others as competitors and take advantage of their position for their own benefit. They are willing to trample on the people under them to advance their own position. In the short story, “Hope for the Flowers,” one caterpillar had the ambition to
get to the top, thinking that there was something great there. So, he trampled all the other caterpillars, wounding many, and reached the very top. But he found there was nothing there, except a long trip to the bottom. Power struggles in this world are like that. To win this power struggle, people are ready to betray anyone. There are no real friendships. No one can be trusted. There is always tension, which leads to great stress. People have no peace and can hardly sleep. The disciples knew this very well and blamed the Gentile rulers. Still, they were becoming just like them.

Jesus said to them, “Not so with you” (43a). What does this mean? It means that their mindset, value system and lifestyle should be different from Gentile rulers. Here the word “you” is plural. It refers to Christian community which is the church. Church is completely different from worldly organizations. Jesus is the head of the body, the church (Col 1:18a), and we are the members of his body (Eph 5:30). So, we must follow Jesus’ example. Jesus introduced a totally different concept of leadership, saying, “…whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (43-44). Jesus did not deny their desire to become great. He only taught them how to become truly great. The word “whoever” means this is a general principle which applies universally. It indicates that anyone willing to practice his teaching can become great. Greatness is not limited to a few people as it is in the power hierarchy. Anyone and everyone can be great. The problem is how. Jesus said, “must be your servant” and “must be slave of all.” Here Jesus urges us to learn the attitude of a servant or a slave to become great. This was revolutionary. In Plato’s “Republic,” the ideal city founded by Socrates was characterized by four virtues: wisdom, courage, moderation and justice. Under Plato’s influence, those who wanted to be leaders tried to cultivate these virtues. At that time, servants and slaves were hardly regarded as human beings; they were living tools. It was unthinkable for one with the attitude of a servant or slave to be a leader. Servantship was not regarded as a virtue at all, but as a duty. But Jesus said it is the most essential quality for leadership in the Christian community.

Hearing Jesus’ words must have shocked his disciples. As difficult as it was to hear, it is even harder to practice. There had never been an example, and they needed one. That is why Jesus pointed them to his own example. Let’s read verse 45. “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.” The word “even” is significant. As the messianic title “Son of Man” indicates, Jesus is God (Jn 1:1). He could be the exception to this teaching. But even Jesus became a servant. Therefore, there is no exception; anyone and everyone who wants to be great must learn this servantship.

Servantship is grounded in humility. Humility is not just a means to attain a goal. Humility is neither temporary nor training for the next step. It is a mindset before God and the imitation of Christ on the most foundational level. Apostle Paul urges believers: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus…” (Php 2:5). Jesus’ servant leadership
began with how he saw himself. Though he is in very nature God, he did not think he should be equal with God. Rather, he gave up his rights and privileges as God, in an act of renunciation. Jesus set aside his power and glory and took on the weaknesses of human flesh. Even among human beings, Jesus became a servant, not a ruler. He said, “I am among you as one who serves” (Lk 22:27c). Jesus served his disciples, caring for them one by one, bearing all their weaknesses, and even washing their dirty feet (Jn 13:5). Afterward, Jesus said, “I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you” (Jn 13:15).

To serve others as he did, Jesus denied the desire to be served. Everyone wants to be valued by others and to feel important. Everyone wants to be respected by others and to become somebody. It is a deeply rooted human desire. Though Jesus was worthy of all honor, glory and praise from all human beings (Rev 5:12), he denied this desire. Rather, he served others. Serving is not just doing menial acts for others, like a waiter at a dinner table. Serving is not just doing good deeds such as giving a gift or buying a meal. Serving is not a means to become great. Serving has a much deeper meaning; it is to be transformed by learning of Christ.

Duane Elmer is an honorary Professor of International Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In his book, “Cross-Cultural Servanthood,” he describes the elements of serving: openness, acceptance, trust, learning and understanding. The process of serving is not static, but dynamic. These elements are interrelated in terms of serving. In order to serve someone, we need to open our hearts and welcome them so they may feel comfortable. We need to accept them as they are, even though they are quite different from us. Then they can feel that they are valued. We should build trust by respecting others as human beings made in God’s image. A sign of this trust is the sharing of something very personal. Regarding learning, we should not teach one-sidedly, but learn mutually. Learning from others signals humility and willingness to identify with them. Understanding comes as we learn from and with others. Without understanding we cannot serve others properly, but only irritate them. When all of these elements are present in our serving, we can say that we serve others truly. In order to serve mankind to the full measure, Jesus gave everything, even his own life, as a ransom for our sins. Jesus’ example of serving was the total sacrifice of himself.

Serving others like Jesus sounds great, noble and fantastic. However, to serve others requires sacrificing our time, energy and money. When we do this, we may wonder what will happen to us, thinking, “If I do not serve myself, who will serve me?” When it is time to serve others practically, it is easy to become reluctant. Then naturally, we become selfish and serve only ourselves. Does a selfish life lead to happiness and joy? No! Not at all! The Biblical concept of sin is self-centeredness. Sin is the rebellious assertion of myself against the love and authority of God, and against the welfare of my neighbor. We can find so many words that begin with “self” in the dictionary: self-seeking, self-glory, self-righteous, self-pity, self-consciousness, etc.
To serve others, this self-centeredness must be overcome. But the power of the self is so strong that it enslaves us. It manifests itself repeatedly even though we don’t want it to. This is evident when we find the words, “I,” “my,” “me,” “mine” coming out of our mouths frequently. Even cute little babies often say “mine” as their first word. To serve others we must be set free from this self-centeredness. How? We must learn to deny ourselves. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34). Paul learned this secret and said, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). To love God and to love others, we need to deny ourselves and let Christ rule over us. This is the way to truly become a servant. When we do this, we will be joyful, happy and fruitful.

Jesus’ servantship has had a huge impact on the world. So many people have followed Jesus’ example and lived a truly great life. Abraham Lincoln is a good example. When he began his career as a lawyer, Edward Stanton opposed him in many ways. Once Stanton said, “We don’t need to go to Africa to see a gorilla. If we go to Springfield, Illinois we meet Gorilla Lincoln.” After Lincoln was elected president, Stanton continued to attack him, saying that his election was a “national disaster.” Everyone noticed that he was an enemy of Lincoln. When Lincoln formed his Cabinet, he appointed Stanton as Secretary of War, the most important position at that time of the Civil War. Lincoln’s aides strongly opposed this. Lincoln responded, “I don’t care if he despises me 100 times. I cannot find such a qualified person as him to overcome this crisis.” His aides responded, “Still, he is an enemy. We must get rid of him.” Lincoln said with a smile, “I also think so. We should get rid of our enemies from our hearts. When we practice Jesus’ words, ‘Love your enemy,’ we can make our enemies our friends. Then our enemy will be gone and we will earn a friend. We can kill two birds with one stone.” Stanton became a friend and coworker of Lincoln. He overcame many hardships in uniting America. Later, when Lincoln was killed, Stanton was more sorrowful than others and said at his funeral, “Here the greatest man has been laid.”

My name is Mark. The late Dr. Samuel Lee gave me this name because I served in menial ways. From my freshman year I cleaned the church, including the traditional Korean restroom which had no running water. I manually printed copies of Bible messages and study questions. I repaired leaking roofs and made the environment for meetings. One student thought that I was a professional janitor. I thought that by serving like this, my life would become meaningful and great. But my mind was always anxious; I had no real peace or joy. I did not know what was wrong with me. But through deep Bible study I realized that I was using serving as a means to become great and that my motive in serving others must be to imitate Jesus.

In 1974 I married Missionary Anna. We took Mark 10:45 as our house church key verse. In 1976 we began to pioneer Korea University along with others. We tried to imitate Jesus by
serving others. At first, I tried to serve them by helping solve their problems. Yet as soon as
one problem was solved, other problems appeared. Problem solving seemed to be endless. I
hoped that people would not have any problems. But this is true only at the graveyard.
Through much prayer I began to focus on planting faith in the words of God. Real solutions
and lasting fruit comes only from the word of God. Realizing this I devoted myself to studying
and teaching the words of God diligently. A couple of times I delivered a message every day
for one week. Then the words of God gained power. Many young people were transformed
and dedicated themselves to God’s kingdom’s work.

When I studied Matthew’s gospel, I was deeply moved by Jesus’ compassion on the
marginalized. Matthew was a tax collector, which was equivalent to a prostitute or a drug
dealer. Such people were despised and cast out from that society. How did Jesus call him as
his disciple and raise him as a great servant of God? I realized that Jesus had mercy on him.
Jesus understood his weakness; he was like a bruised reed or a smoldering wick (Mt 12:20).
Jesus bore all his weaknesses with gentleness and patience. Jesus never gave up hope for
him. In Jesus’ undying mercy and hope Matthew was healed and could grow to become a
beautiful gospel writer. I tried to practice Jesus’ mercy and hope. I learned that I should not
lose hope for anyone. Everyone has hope in Jesus. Learning this changed the way I served
people. In the past, with a good intention, I had tried to correct people’s weak points, thinking
that they would become better. But it did not work at all. Rather, it wounded them. I was
shocked. In addition, I found that I could not even correct myself. Since then, I tried to see only
the good point in others and help them to develop it. I applied this to everyone, including my
children and myself. There was a noticeable change in my ministry. One day Dr. Samuel Lee
sent me two brothers who had been in Russia. He asked me to take care of them because
they fought so much they had become a bad influence. Most people blamed Jacob Lim more
than the other person. But when I observed him very carefully, I found that he was very faithful
and pure. He was truthful and childlike, but he was inflexible. He could not lie nor bear the
small wrongs of others. That is why he was blamed and could not get along with others. I
commended his good point instead of pointing out his weak point and encouraged him to
develop his good point. Through this, he was greatly strengthened and changed. Later, he
became a good shepherd and a wonderful manager of the Anam ministry. In this way, some
very unlikely people were changed and became our close and reliable coworkers.

Missionary Anna learned from Jesus to value one lost person more than 99 righteous persons
based on Jesus’ parable in Luke 15. She devoted herself to one-to-one ministry and to a life of
prayer. Every morning she prayed with shepherd’s wives. As she took care of people one by
one with the words of God and prayer, so many were changed into useful servants of God. In
this way we worked together in serving God’s people. When we did so, God blessed our
ministry abundantly.
After 35 years of serving in Korea, God led us to America as missionaries. We had to do many things by ourselves. Through this I came to know that in Korea I had been served in many ways by others. In America, I expected people to serve me with respect. When a young American patted me on the back like a friend, I felt offended because I have a Korean seniority mentality. Through this I repented of my pride and decided to learn of Jesus’ humility newly. I have taken Philippians 2:7 as my key verse for the last five years. It says, “…he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant….” Whenever I wanted to be recognized or respected by others, I meditated on this verse. God’s blessing of learning Jesus’ mindset is overflowing in my heart.

In 1977, when Dr. Lee left Korea to go to America, he appointed me to oversee the Bible study material team. For a couple of years, I could not sleep well due to the heavy responsibility. But through this I could grow and was able to serve my fellow Korean staff members for 28 years with the words of God. After coming to America, I wanted to make the same kind of contribution. By God’s grace an American Bible study material team was formed in 2007. It included American senior pastors: Ron Ward, Mark Vucekovich and Teddy Hembekides, and some Korean missionaries. As we studied the Bible together and shared our agonies we formed a very close bond of friendship, overcoming cultural differences. In God’s work genuine friendship is crucial. As Pastor Ron and I have worked together closely in various ways a genuine friendship has grown like that of Jonathan and David.

After the 2008 Purdue Conference, Missionary Anna and I had a plan to pioneer one campus. We had no plan to stay in Chicago. At that moment, Mother Sarah Barry asked Missionary Anna to become her personal assistant. We prayed a lot to find God’s leading. We realized that serving Mother Barry was the most important mission for us. So, we decided to follow God’s leading. Since we have lived with Mother Barry, we were amazed by her servant’s life. She has an open house. She leaves the door open 24 hours and many people freely come in without knocking. Whoever comes is welcomed with delicious food, gourmet coffee, and most of all Bible study and prayer. Bible study is not one-sided. She always says that she learns from others. She trusts people, especially young people. She tries to understand each person by listening very prayerfully. I can see Jesus’ image of a servant in her life. I feel far from this. It is really a great privilege to live with her. I pray that I may learn Jesus’ servantship from my heart throughout my lifetime. It is such a great blessing to learn Jesus’ servant leadership. May God bless us all to do so.