



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for Lent 5**

March 17, 2024

## Free to Serve

### Mark 10:32–45

<sup>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.”*

Luther once wrote that the Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none and the Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Today’s Gospel from Mark 10 beautifully illustrates this paradoxical nature of the Christian life, for here Jesus tells us two things: 1) that He came as a servant in order to set us free, and 2) that the greatest way we can live out that freedom is by being servants of one another. So today we want to celebrate our freedom and grow in our servanthood. Because of Christ, *the Servant*, you and I have been "Set Free to Serve."

So, we’ve recognized that a Christian is both free and a servant. However, according to our old Adam, we were neither free, nor servants of one another. According to our sinful nature, we were slaves, slaves to self, slaves to sin.

Look at the people in our text. Don’t they demonstrate this self-serving attitude? Look



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at the brothers James and John, seeking their own interest. They tell Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. . . . Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Give us what we want, Jesus, let us have our way. We want to sit on royal thrones, the best seats in the house – right next to Yours, of course. The fact that they were seeking positions of glory, not in order to give, but to get, becomes obvious when we see how the other disciples reacted: They became indignant, perceiving that James and John were seeking to rule over them. Why did this make them angry? Not because they considered the request intrinsically wrong, but because James and John had beaten them to the punch; they all wanted those positions themselves, and James and John had simply gotten to Jesus with this request ahead of them. Hadn't Mark just recorded in the previous chapter that the disciples had been arguing as to who was the greatest among them? Luke tells us they had this same argument on the night of Jesus' betrayal, even after Jesus had washed their feet, even after He had given them His Holy Supper.

Knowing that this would be an ongoing struggle amongst His followers, Jesus called them all together and said, "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!"

That's the way of the world, isn't it? Lording it over people, using power to get your way? How easily we can see this sinful attitude in the disciples in our text. But, what about us? How are we like James and John? "Lord, I want you to do for me whatever I ask. I want my membership in the church to serve my needs." Give us what we want, let us have our way. Don't we have to confess that our service in the church is, at least partly, self-serving? Mixed in with all the right motives, isn't there also a desire to win . . . respect, admiration, maybe even a little praise from our fellow members? How do you feel when someone says of you, "My, what a hard-worker! Where would the church be without you?" Like James and John, we all like a little glory.

Or how might we be like the other ten disciples? Do you feel resentment toward those who may be getting more attention or credit than you are? Do you resent the success or good fortune of other people? Do you make judgments about the speck of selfishness in someone else's eye without recognizing the log in your own eye? Like the ten disciples, we can become indignant with those who seek – and achieve – the glory we secretly want for ourselves.

But surely we're not like those Gentile rulers, are we? The French ruler Napoleon once said, "I care only for people who are useful to me, and only so long as they are useful." Do we ever feel that way, at least to some extent, maybe even subconsciously? Using people, dealing harshly with family members, cutting down a fellow church member – these are signs of the same worldly attitude. Selfishness is the way of the world. Being first, being great, being served. Ambition, glory, jealousy. It's in the world, and it's in the church, and it's in you and me. But Jesus says to His disciples, "It shall not be so among you."

So far, we've looked at James and John, the other ten disciples, and the Gentile



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rulers; we've even looked at ourselves. But there's one person we haven't considered yet, and that's Jesus. Jesus, the Son of Man who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

He calls Himself "the Son of Man." That term is drawn from a prophecy in the Book of Daniel, where there's a vision of "one like a son of man" who comes from heaven with "dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." So, if ever there was anyone who could rightfully demand that others serve Him, it was Jesus, the Son of Man. That was the kind of glorified Messiah the disciples wanted and expected, and as His closest followers, they wanted a share in some of that glory.

Yet Jesus says that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom. The Son of Man, as Jesus describes Himself, sounds more like another figure prophesied in the Old Testament – the "Suffering Servant" described in Isaiah. This servant would make himself an offering for sin. He would pour out his soul unto death. This righteous servant would make many to be accounted righteous by bearing their iniquities and sins. This is the kind of Servant-Messiah Jesus came to be and wants His disciples to see.

To serve, to give His life as a ransom, Jesus must drink a certain cup. "The cup that I drink," He says. The cup He's speaking of is the cup of suffering. Remember His agony in the garden: "My Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done." Jesus there too was speaking of the suffering He was entering into. He's talking about the cross. For it's on the cross that He would drink the cup of wrath, the cup of God's righteous anger against sin, in our place and for our salvation.

Because Jesus drank His cup of suffering – the cup of wrath – there is now for us a cup of salvation. This cup of blessing – for which we give thanks – is the cup from which we receive Christ's holy blood poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins. Strengthened by this salutary gift, we are enabled to drink the cup of suffering we encounter in our own lives, especially when we suffer for the sake of the gospel – as James and John eventually did as persecuted apostles, and as all Christians do in one form or another.

"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus came down into our mess, into this world broken by our selfishness and sins of every sort, imaginable and unimaginable, and He came as a servant. He came to give His life as a ransom. "Ransom" was the term used for the price paid to release slaves or prisoners of war, people in bondage who could not free themselves. That's *us*, beloved! We needed a ransom. We were slaves – slaves to self, bond-slaves to sin, prisoners of death.

So the Son of Man came to give His life as our ransom. He paid the price that sets us free from our slavery to self, free from our bondage to sin, free from our prison of death. Now we are the redeemed of the Lord, ransomed from the grave. We've been set free. As Luther says so well in his explanation of the Second Article, Christ "has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. . . ."



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But there's more. Luther's explanation doesn't stop there; it goes on: ". . . that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." You see, Christ has redeemed and ransomed you for a purpose. You've been set free to serve. Christ has set you free from the harsh slavery of selfishness, sin, and death, and now you serve in the most blessed kind of "slavery," which is really no slavery at all, for you are slaves of Christ and servants of one another. That's what Jesus is saying in our text today: "If even I, the Son of Man, came to serve, then that's the way it will be also among you. My disciples will be servants of one another."

The Son has set us free, and we are free indeed – free from self-centeredness and resentment, free from seeking after glory, because our glory is in the Lord. We're free enough to serve one another. The way to greatness in God's kingdom is the way of servanthood. The church is not a business, where people climb the ladder of success by stepping on others. The church is not an arena for raw ambition, where people seek personal prestige through positions of power. Jesus says, "It shall not be so among you." No, the church is a community of servants, and as such, a true counter-culture to the world. A serving, loving, Christian community is a refreshing oasis in this self-serving world in which we live.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when we serve one another out of a free and willing spirit – whether we're serving coffee, singing in the choir, providing transportation to and from medical care, or just holding a baby so a mom can listen to the sermon – when you do these things, you're being Christ's servant community, which is what Jesus says you are and what He makes you to be.

Oh, fellow redeemed, Christ Jesus, our Servant-Messiah gave His life as our ransom and has set us free – set free for a purpose, set free to serve. Thank God for the many opportunities He gives for us to live out our freedom, blessing us even as He blesses others through us. We are indeed "Set Free to Serve" – served first by the greatest Servant of all: Our Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen