

UPSIDE DOWN
Mark 10:32-45

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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She was an old maid in every sense of the word. My many pardons to the older ladies in our congregation who never married. You might not fit the stereotypical old maid image, but I guarantee you Miss Short did.

Miss Short was the band director at Sevier Junior High. She was so old that she was around when the Dead Sea was just sick. She had been teaching band for about 40 years, which was about 15 too many. She gifted yours truly with the ability to play the trumpet. She would whack you with her baton, belittle and personally humiliate you in front of the rest of the middle school band, and, occasionally, even put a clothespin on your nose. Yes, a big, wooden, spring-tight, snap-shut clothespin. When you play a brass instrument, you're not supposed to breathe through your nose; you're supposed to breathe with your mouth. And she could always hear nose breathing!

Louis Micks played the tuba. And she could hear Louis breathing through his nose. After two warnings, on the third nose-breathing offense she walked over and placed that clothespin, spring-tight, right on top of Louis's snout. You could see him tear up in pain, wince from embarrassment as she shouted, "Now play Louis. Play without breathing through your nose."

One day, Miss Short called for an extra practice after school. She gave little notice, and after it was past time for our parents to pick us up, four of us were left hanging around the school. We just happened to live on Miss Short's way home. "Get in the car," she growled, "and I'll give you a ride." She knew she'd have to stay until every last one of us was gone, so she decided to take us home.

When you're in junior high, there is something special about riding "shotgun" – riding up in the front seat. No airbags in those days. Forget the fact it's the seat of death when it comes to car wrecks. We wanted to ride shotgun then, and people want to ride shotgun now.

While Miss Short was packing up her bags, we made our way toward her car. Now, I'd always imagined she rode a witch's broom, but she actually owned a big Buick. For some reason, three of us decided we were going to race. Race to the passenger's side. Race for that special position of privilege. Race to ride shotgun.

Why we ever wanted to ride up there with Miss Short I'll never know. But we did. It was more the thrill of competition than anything else.

We started the race. I was running with my trumpet case swinging in hand. The clarinet player was moving swiftly behind me. I was within two feet of tagging the passenger's side and declaring

myself the winner when David Brooks, the clarinet player – a year older than I was – dove toward the passenger seat and, in a last, desperate move, jarred my trumpet case which then slammed against Miss Short’s passenger door.

As we all tried to recover from the shock and the sound (thank goodness Miss Short was still in her office), we looked up to see about a three inch black mark running right across her white car’s passenger door – a mark made by my trumpet case.

Let me just say the clothespin was light punishment compared to what David Brooks and I received. We endured the tongue lashing of our lives. Now, I never got in trouble in school. I was not comfortable receiving a tongue lashing. I really felt like Mr. Brooks had pushed my case into the car – which, in fact, he had. When Miss Short looked you eye-to-eye, pointing her finger in your face and asking why we had been so foolish as to make a race out of riding in the front seat, we stood in stunned silence with no logical answers.

But you know it’s true, and I know it’s true. We all want to ride shotgun. We all want to ride in the front seat – especially when we think somebody else might take that seat, that position of privilege, away from us.

In our story this morning, that’s exactly what’s happening with the Sons of Thunder – Zebedee’s boys, James and John. They are racing to the front seat.

Look at the middle of verse 35.

Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.

That’s a trick question all teenagers ask their parents. “Will you do something for me?” Never answer that question until you inquire, “What would you like for me to do?” That’s the Jesus way to respond to a blanket request.

Well, they lay it out. They want to ride shotgun. “Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on Your left” (verse 37).

Just promise us that when you set up your kingdom in Jerusalem, as we make our way there, that you’re going to let us be co-regents with you, sitting at the right and the left hand of your throne.

Their request is completely out of place, especially when you set it in context. Jesus has been on the *hodos*, that is, on the road. Look at verse 32. “And they were on the *hodos*, on the road.” In Mark’s Gospel, being on the road means going to Jerusalem. And going to Jerusalem means going to be crucified.

Sometimes it’s translated “road.” Sometimes it’s translated “way.” Turn back to chapter 9, verse 33. “He began to question them, ‘What were you discussing on the *hodos*, on the way?’”

Now an interesting thing about Mark 9 and 10 is this: In both chapters, back to back, Jesus is talking about His suffering. He gives more detail in chapter 10. But in both instances, as He begins to predict His pain and His passion, His suffering and His sorrow, His crown and His

crucifixion, the disciples miss the mark. They ignore what Jesus is saying. They continue to live a dream that, indeed, Jesus is going to set up an earthly kingdom in Jerusalem. And they argue over who is the greatest, over who is going to have the place of priority in the kingdom. They brush off Jesus' warnings about suffering and pain and death as simply something like, "We'll have a hard time, but glory will come." And they are sure they can suffer the hard time if they're going to get the glory.

These are two interesting parallel passages, these *hodos* passages – these on the road passages, these on the way passages. On the way to crucifixion.

Turn back to chapter 9 and let's see how much it is like chapter 10.

In chapter 9 we have the second time that Jesus predicts His suffering. The first time Peter tells Jesus, "Don't talk that way. We'll never let that happen to you."

Look at Mark 9:31-32.

For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

You see, they are completely without clarity when it comes to Jesus' predictions about the crucifixion. They simply don't understand.

Mark 9:33-35

And when they came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the *hodos*? What were you talking about on the way?" (You now know that Mark uses this word, "on the road" or "on the way" to indicate the march to crucifixion.) But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. And sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all."

Notice greatness and servanthood paired together.

Mark 9:36

And taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me."

Jesus exposes their spat when He turns and says, "What were you all talking about back there? What were you discussing after I had mentioned my death and my suffering?"

The question is met with an embarrassed silence, for He has caught each of them jockeying for a position of power, wrestling to ride shotgun.

The picture Mark presents has tragic comic dimensions. Jesus walks ahead in silence on His way to His sacrificial death while His straggling disciples push and shove, trying to establish the order

of the procession behind Him. They think He is going to glory, and He's going to the cross. And they are jockeying for the next position behind Him. If they knew where He was going, would they be so quick to follow? So quick to want to be next in line, to have a position in the pecking order?

So Jesus gives them a paradox. "The one who wants to be first must become last of all and servant of all." And Jesus takes a child – who had no position of authority, no status, no power, no influence in that first century culture – Jesus picks up a humble child and says, "Great disciples will show humble service for the humble."

Jesus is telling His disciples the greatest thing they can do is serve in humility and try not to be noticed.

In 1983, the UPI released a poignant story of a young leukemia patient and the special friendship that he enjoyed during the course of his illness. P. J. Dragan, D-R-A-G-A-N, was only five years old when he was diagnosed with leukemia. Soon thereafter the boy began to receive a series of cheery notes and cards, little gifts and goodies to brighten his spirits. Each was adorned with a large green bow. These presents all came from an anonymous friend who signed each card simply: "Magic Dragon." One of P.J.'s favorite gifts was a large green plush toy dragon, who quickly became the embodiment of the gift-giver and P.J.'s constant companion.

As P.J. grew sicker, "Magic Dragon's" attentions never waned; notes of encouragement and support arrived continuously. The treasured toy dragon accompanied P.J. to the hospital, sympathetically sporting the same bandages and sharing all the painful, unpleasant treatments with this little boy. Tragically, despite all efforts, P.J. lost his battle with Leukemia. At his funeral – you might imagine – the largest bouquet was a huge spray of daisies, all tied up with an enormous green bow – "Magic Dragon's" final gift.

No one ever discovered "Magic Dragon's" identity. After some initial inquiries, P.J.'s parents wisely realized that it was more appropriate to honor "Dragon's" chosen anonymity, allowing both P.J. and "Magic Dragon" the joy of a friendship based solely on love, dedication, and service. "Magic Dragon" saw an opportunity to reach out in love, to risk serving another with no thought for reward and no concern for recognition.

Thank you, "Magic Dragon," for teaching us how to serve. ("Thank You, Magic Dragon," Homiletics Online, 3/24/1991, www.homileticsonline.com)

One of the most difficult challenges you will ever face as a human being is a battle within your own self to serve without recognition. It's a battle against your own ego to serve in selflessness. Our egos crave recognition, like a hummingbird craves nectar. We want to be patted on the back. We – all of us do, I do – want to be told "Well done" for our sacrifices. Our own need for affirmation and approval overshadows our attempts at servanthood and undermine our best-minded motivations.

If you ever serve like Jesus asks you to serve, you'll serve in humble silence.

But it's hard. It's hard not to want to see your name printed in the bulletin or a plaque hung in the hallway on your behalf. It's hard to serve selflessly.

Now back to our text in Mark 10. It's so much like Mark 9. The two go hand-in-hand.

Jesus sets his face like a flint toward Jerusalem, His final destiny. He will boldly confront all the forces awaiting Him. He fervently presses toward the fate which He has predicted for Himself, amidst a dual atmosphere of amazement on the part of the crowd and fear on the part of His followers. The crowd, made up of pilgrims on their way to the Passover Festival, is caught up with the thrill of Messianic expectation. But those closest to Jesus sense a supernatural foreboding filling the air. What prophet was ever warmly received in Jerusalem? Indeed, few escaped alive.

Facing their fear, Jesus calls The Twelve aside. For the third and final time, he explicitly tells them what awaits Him in Jerusalem so there will be no surprises.

Verses 33-34

We are going to Jerusalem. I will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn me to death. They will deliver me to the Gentiles. They will mock me, spit upon me, scourge me, and kill me. After three days, I will rise again.

Verse 34 makes verse 35 unbelievable. I hope to goodness some time has passed, but I can't be sure that it has. For every time Jesus puts His disciples on the *hodos*, on the way to suffering, on the road to the crucifixion, they are jockeying for positions to follow behind.

Verse 35, 37

James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Him, saying to Him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you....Let us sit in the places of honor when you have the kingdom banquet."

James and John want to be the crown princes sitting on the co-thrones with Jesus. Jesus says, "You don't know what you're asking for. Do you have any idea about the cup I'm going to drink? Can you drink that cup? Can you be baptized with the baptism of which I am going to be baptized?"

The cup in the Old Testament in Isaiah 51:17, 22 and all throughout is God's wrath. It is death. The cup is a metaphor for suffering in the Old Testament. Listen to Isaiah 51:17.

"Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem,
You who have drunk from the Lord's hand the cup of His anger;
The chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs."

Remember what Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane, thinking of the cross, thinking of the wrath of God that was to be His? "Father, take this cup from me."

Within the image of baptism is the image of death. When we baptize in the baptistry, it's the image of death and resurrection. "Can you be submerged in suffering like I'm going to be? Can you be plunged into calamity, into the waters with me? Can you share my fate?"

James and John so glibly respond. "We can. If there is going to be a little hardship before the glory days, we're there with you in the hardship. So we want to be there with you in the glory, Jesus." And Jesus replies, "I'm not in charge of giving out the seats at the head table in God's kingdom. But I will tell you this: You will drink the cup that I'm going to drink."

In fact, we read in Acts 12:2 where James, the brother of John, the son of Zebedee, is killed by Herod. He drinks the cup. He is baptized with the baptism of death as Jesus was. Indeed, he does drink the cup.

Acts 12:2

And he had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword (speaking of Herod the king).

The other disciples are angry. They're not angry because James and John have been so calloused and so uncaring about Jesus' prediction of His suffering. They're angry because they missed the opportunity to slide in front of everybody so as not to have to wait in line for the positions of power. They're angry because, quite frankly, James and John beat them to the punch.

We want to be the greatest. It begins even when we're toddlers. We struggle in the playpen for our favorite toy. As teens we hope desperately that we will be selected first for the pickup game of basketball. In high school we hang out with certain people in certain places and act particular ways in order to find our niche, our place in the pecking order. A businessman secretly butters up the boss in hopes of gaining the promotion. An elderly woman, otherwise gentle and gracious, turns into a competitive beast in the heat of a seemingly innocent board game.

At times so much of our energy seems to be expended on gaining position and finding our place and coming out on top and winning the game and calling the shots.

So it was with James and John. And so it is with us.

We're all, in some ways, in love with ourselves. It's kind of like the old ditty:

I like me, I love me,

My self I do adore;

And every day, in every way,

I love me more and more.

That's the way James and John felt. They were in love with themselves. They were grasping for power.

Jesus has more to teach them. "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be

first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

“Don’t be like the world,” Jesus is saying. The world plays king-of-the-hill, where everybody claws and scratches to get on top and then kicks and pushes to stay on top. That’s the way the Gentile rulers become great.

“But it’s not that way with you” (verse 43). “If you want to be great, you need to be a servant.”

“But if you want to be first, you have to be a slave” Jesus says in Mark 10:44. “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (10:45).

How do we know that being great equals being a servant? Because the greatest of all, Jesus Himself, came not to be serve but to serve. The Son of Man bent down and washed feet.

Everything is upside down in the gospel. We are not like the world is. The church cannot be as the world is.

Do you want to know what it really means to serve in church? It’s to do something quietly, never have your name listed, make a difference in the lives of others, and hope to God that nobody ever recognizes you so that your glory in heaven is not stolen away.

Gordon MacDonald said, “You can tell whether you are becoming a servant by how you act when people treat you like one.” (quoted in *Group*, January-February 2001, 23)

And Jesus’ ultimate service, He notes at the end of verse 45, is to give His life a ransom for many. “Ransom” is the word used for the compensation for personal injury or for a crime. It’s the word used when we purchase the freedom of an enslaved relative in Leviticus 25. It’s the price paid as the equivalent for the sacrifice of the first born (Numbers 18). It’s the concept of ransom – the idea of the cost, the substitution and atonement as Jesus pays the price for me and for you, a price we cannot pay.

To follow this Messiah is to be self-giving, to be a servant. And it is to suffer that we, too (Romans 8:17) can share His glory.

Behind all of us is the image of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the cup of the spilled blood. Because all who are disciples and accept the baptism and drink Jesus’ cup also pledge themselves to live and die by the pattern of the cross.

A fourteen year old girl was being interviewed just before the election of Pope John Paul II. A CBS newscaster roamed up and down the streets of Vatican City posing this question to people in the crowd: “What would you like to do if you were the Pope?” When he came to this 14-year-old girl, she replied: “I’d cover the communion wafers with chocolate.”

Wow. That’s our problem. That’s what we’ve already done. We have a power hungry, sweet tooth discipleship among churches today. We wrap the gospel like a package of success

and happiness, so the Bible looks like a box of spiritual chocolates and feel-goods. The results are deadly. Helge Rubenstein, cookbook author, has a book with a chapter entitled “Death by Chocolate.” It is a fitting title for the effect on the church of our preference not for the plain, raw gospel, but for chocolate-covered communion wafers. (“No Green Without Red,” Homiletics Online, 10/20/1991, www.homileticsonline.com)

Jesus offered no chocolate. He said to His disciples, “You will drink this cup. You will be baptized with my baptism. You will suffer for the sake of the cross.” The word “cross” is not a nice word. It’s hard word, splintery wood. It’s an old rugged cross to which we must always cling. The slick and silvery crosses don’t really exist, and neither do chocolate-covered communion wafers.

Jesus came to suffer. To be slave. To be servant. To pay for my ransom. And for yours.

San Diego minister Mark Trotter tells of the time when he and his wife and several others spent an informal evening with Robert Frost. Trotter was impressed by the great poet’s humility. Frost had no airs about him. No pretense. Every reference to himself was self-effacing: I am a Vermont farmer. Trotter then recalls how Archibald MacLeish, another great poet, once introduced Robert Frost. He put it like this: No matter what happens to him, Robert Frost always comes out of it a little more like himself. (Barry P. Boulware, “A Little More Like Himself,” 4/12/92, www.homileticsonline.com)

James and John didn’t have the humility of Robert Frost. They were seeking and grabbing the spotlight, the position, the seat of power, the place. And all the while, Jesus, the Son of God, is humbly serving and begging them to do the same.

You see, when you’re in the kingdom of God you have to realize that you’re chosen to walk on the *hodos*, on the way where everything, and I mean everything, is upside down.