

# Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

**WHOEVER WISHES TO BECOME GREAT**

**Mark 10:35-45**

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Analysis by Ron Starenko**

35James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" 39They replied, "We are able." Then 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; 40but 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."

41When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44and whoever wishes to become first among you must be slave of all. 45For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

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## DIAGNOSIS: When Up is Down (The Illusion)

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Wrong-Headed***

Let's face it, we all wish to become great, James, John, you, me, everyone anywhere in the world. It's built into our genes, and it goes to our heads. Case in point, Jesus and his disciples are "going up to Jerusalem" (v. 32), and what could be better than to rise to where the action is, where the power resides. So, who doesn't wish to luxuriate in privilege and importance, as we head for the top of the world? And, all this with Jesus' warning that he is heading down, not up (Mark 10:33-34), to the bottom, to the cross. Not getting it, the other disciples become angry with James and John (v. 41) who have the audacity to reach for elusive glory, as they were feeling high and mighty too, as we all enjoy putting others down, taking pot shots at the big shots, targeting big government, big corporations, rich CEO's, mega-churches, even using Jesus to put them in their place, without ever looking at ourselves.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Wrong-Hearted***

If our heads are in the clouds, looking for some illusory glory at the top, where is our heart? Jesus asks James and John if they are able to drink his cup, to which they naively reply, "We are able" (v. 39), as though he were referring to some kind of toast when they get to the top, in his "glory" (v. 37). They really don't wish to go where he is going, even though he had made that clear to them more than once. They— and we too—want no part of the cup of suffering and death, not his, not ours. Furthermore, even more sobering, we are not able to go where he is going, as our "minds [hearts] are set on human things" (Matt 16:23). What else can we do but deceive ourselves, pretending to know what we are doing and where we are going, trusting the illusion more than Jesus, not even reckoning that what looks

like up is really down, where we are really heading.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dead Wrong***

Where Jesus is going we could never go and survive. Even he was fearful of going there, as he lies prone in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26-36-46), praying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." It is not suffering, the kind we know of body, mind, or spirit, what all human beings know, that Jesus is facing. His is a far worse fate, "the bowl of (God's) wrath" (Isa. 51:22), "the deep waters...and the flood" (Ps. 69:2) of God's judgment that rolls over us; the cup we deserve and cannot drink. Sinful beings that we are, stranded and helpless with our vaunted sense of self, we face an abyss we cannot cross. Whatever greatness we thought we had, whatever we've been drinking that makes us believe that we could get through the crisis by some kind of magic, we end up with an everlasting illusion, which is as far down as we can go, dead wrong forever.

## **PROGNOSIS: When Down is Up (The Paradox)**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Healing From Below***

Travel-wise, Jesus and his disciples, were going "up to Jerusalem," but, paradoxically speaking, they were actually going down. The disciples, and we with them, have hit bottom in our quest for greatness. Jesus will go there, too, not aspiring to greatness, what he actually had from all eternity, which he put aside, to enter the depths of human need, as the servant and slave of all, to save us from the bottom up, from the cross, from the grave (Phil. 2:5-11). As he did in the wilderness, also in Gethsemane, Jesus would resist the temptation to seize greatness and escape the cross, prevailing through the travail (Rom. 8:20-23). From the bottom Jesus raises us up, as "the ransom" (v. 45), suffering to bridge the abyss of abandonment we

deserve, reversing the disaster of our downward plunge. Jesus, by his downward ministry, his high-priestly office (Heb. 5:1-10), by an incarnate, self-giving mercy, saves us from below, that we might rise with him.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Bottoms Up***

When the struggle was over, the ransom won, the cup of wrath emptied, the disciples get to drink the cup—earlier the last communion, now the everlasting communion, as the Psalmist wrote, “I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord” (Ps. 116:13). The cup of wrath has been downed by Jesus, which, paradoxically, turns that cup into a bottoms-up celebration of the new covenant. The cup we hoist in the Eucharist is the faithful communing of the church, in our lowliness and weakness, even in the suffering body that is compelled to drink the cup of persecution (v. 39), honoring the greatness of the one who chose the cross, who lives among us, still the Servant-Lord, who daily lifts us into his likeness in forgiveness and fills us with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Raising the Down-Trodden***

Greatness, however, is not the concern—it never was for Jesus, still isn’t, even when “every knee bows” (Phil. 2); greatness is still part of the glory that is yet to come. In the meantime, we are called to be servants and slaves, nothing more, nothing less. We are called to co-operate with Jesus both in his prophetic and high-priestly ministry, not striving for places of honor, “not to be served but to serve” (v. 45), by emptying ourselves, humbling ourselves so as not to lose touch with a down-and-out humanity that is crushed by “the high and the mighty” (v. 42). Jesus remains a scandal to those who aspire to greatness, a Savior to those who know him as one who was also “subject to weakness” (Heb. 5:2) and has become our High Priest,

“the source of our eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb. 5:9). If it’s greatness we all might wish for, the path is still downward (and upward at the same time), as Jesus has made ever so clear by his life and death, and even in his resurrection, still pointing to what is below: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...’Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Matt. 25:35-36, 40). So, whoever wishes to become great among us here today, there is still only one way to go and live, and that is to serve as he did, as he still does.