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Following Jesus Means... Getting Over Yourself

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TEXT: Mark 10:32-45 (ESV)

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, 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. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

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." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 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?" 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, 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." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. 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. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

I have noticed many signs lately that are posted in front of many stores, restaurants, and various businesses that say "help wanted". I'm told there's a shortage of people to fill these positions. Businesses are finding themselves unable to effectively carry out

their services as well as they'd like to for lack of employees. So they've put out these signs and they're hoping to gain people's attention and move them to take action and join their working team.

In today's passage, we have Jesus posting his own "wanted" sign to gain the attention and commitment of those of us who are his followers. He's approached by James and John in our passage for today, who have a request: "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask." Boy, that's loaded, isn't it? It sounds like kids with a parent. And Jesus graciously asks them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" "We want you to let us sit at your right and the other at your left, in your glory." In other words, they want the top positions of authority to rule over others and be served by those under them. It's quite a request, especially when you consider the context in which it's made. Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, and there must have been great tension in the air. In fact, we're told that they were amazed and afraid about his leading them to Jerusalem. Maybe they're thinking that there's going to be a fierce battle ahead of them if Jesus had plans to finally make his move as a political messiah for Israel. And besides that, Jesus has just made his third passion prediction about what's going to happen to him in Jerusalem. He's very graphic this time with the prediction. It's not a pretty picture. He'll be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, condemned to death, handed over to the gentile authorities, and there he will be mocked and spit on and flogged and killed. And after three days, he'll rise, and the disciples didn't even bother to ask him why he was going to do this. But at the end of the episode, he tells them why. He says, "I came to give my life as a ransom for many."

The word ransom here means substitute. He was to be the substitute for you and me. He'll take the punishment that we were supposed to take for our sins upon himself. Sin, you see, separates us from our holy and just God. So, God out of love for us, sent his son to be our substitute so that we might be reconciled to him. Christ's death and resurrection is a rescue mission that restores sinners who place their trust in Jesus.

Anyway, here we have Jesus describing this suffering and horrific death that's coming up for him, which is quite sobering talk, right? But nevertheless, James and John approach him with this outrageous and inappropriate request to be top members in his new administration when he takes over as Israel's king. So obvious, they do not get Jesus, and they certainly don't get what his kingdom is about or what discipleship is about. Jesus points it out to them. He tells them they don't know what they're asking

for, and he also asks them, “Are you able to drink the cup of suffering I’m about to drink and be immersed into the darkness that I’m about to enter?” And they say, “We’re able.” They really don’t know what they’re saying, what they’re talking about. They’re not able. They will desert him in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is arrested by the authorities.

“Well,” Jesus tells them, “you will drink my cup and be immersed, baptized like me someday, but your request for positions of sitting at my right and at my left in glory is not mine to grant.” It’s funny, you can’t help but see irony here about sitting on the right left of Jesus. You see, his glory was the cross with two thieves beside him, one on his right and one on his left, Mark’s gospel tells us. Well, the other disciples, hearing this conversation, are ticked off with James and John. Why? Well, it’s not because of the inappropriateness of their request, but because they were after those positions themselves and James and John appear to be selfishly cutting them out of the picture, getting ahead of them for the power. A shoving match is about to ensue, I’ll bet.

But before things get out of hand, Jesus calls him over to himself and he posts his sign for them to pay attention to. He said, “The pagan rulers love to boss others around and be served, right? The great ones love showing their authority over everyone else.” They were nodding their heads, I’m sure. They knew what he was talking about. Israel had seen that kind of thing firsthand with the Greeks and the Romans who lorded over them. Jesus says that, “But it shall not be so among you, my followers. My followers are to be different than that. Instead of trying to lord it over others, I want them to be servants of one another – to look out for each other’s best interests. Set aside self-centered attitudes.” And then he took it even a step further, saying, “My followers march to the beat of a different drummer: to me. Imitate me, for even I, the powerful son of man sent from God didn’t come to be served but to serve and give my life as a ransom for sinners. I want you to be a self-giving servant like me.” So, what does Jesus’ wanted signs say to his followers? “Self-giving servants wanted.” He calls us to a mindset and attitude to live by which is different from the world’s: to be givers instead of getters, to be servants instead of celebrities.

This story does two things for you and me. It serves us in two ways: it serves to convict us and to correct us. First of all, it convicts us. Whenever I read it and reflect on it, it becomes a mirror for me. I don’t know about you, but when I read the story, I see my own self-centeredness, my tendency to look out for number one, which is just the

opposite of my king Jesus, who gave his life as a ransom for me. And it leaves me feeling a little foolish and embarrassed and ashamed. I actually think it's supposed to do that to us. This text allows us to see our own pettiness mirrored in the pettiness of those disciples. And to see the absurdity of it all; the there's such absurdity in this scene that brings the judgment of the cross on self-centered attitudes and maneuvering for position and power, and it moves me to plead, "Have mercy and forgive me, Lord. I have not been like that servant you want me to be. I have not been good and faithful to you or to others. I've been busy taking care of myself and I've overlooked other people." And Jesus consoles us after we're convicted. He points me to the cross and he says, "But you are forgiven. Now, pick yourself up and follow me down the path of servanthood and give yourself away."

This story also serves to correct course in my life as a follower. We get off course so easily and lose sight of our calling as Christ followers. We get so wrapped up in ourselves in the living of our lives. Years ago, in an editorial cartoon, four words stood out in bold print on this cartoon, one on top of the other, like a monument, a pyramid: "I, me, mine myself," and at the base of this monument were hundreds of thousands of people with their arms held up high as if worshipping at a shrine. And then in small letters, a caption appeared at the bottom of the cartoon, which read, "Speaking of American cults." Surrounding the borders were four familiar lines from well-known commercials at the time: "Have it your way. Do yourself a favor. You owe it to yourself. You deserve a break today." And that's the mindset, the philosophy of our world: looking out for me, myself and I. And we all too easily fall prey to that. And this mindset then seeps into our lives in the local church. The influence of the gospel, you see, has not eliminated at all pride and spiritual competition from us. We still find people in the church who put meeting their needs before meeting their obligations as followers of Christ. One need not look far to find even preachers preaching to reach personal stardom or competing with the church down the road or trying to climb up the ecclesiastical ladder to a higher position. And you'll also find people in the church seeking or seeing the church as a great opportunity for exercising personal power and control over others wanting to see "my will be done" instead of "thy will be done." They can be bullies. I've heard members complaining, "What has the church done for me lately?" or church shoppers asking, "What are you going to do for me if you want me to join?" And I've seen church hoppers that continually are hopping from church to church to church, always looking for that better service and never committing to serve.

But this James and John story forces us as followers of Jesus to really think about what it means to have a servant for a king. Can we shamelessly seek after glory and honor and privilege when our king has given his life in a shameful death to save us? And Jesus clearly says:

No. Worldly notions of rank and honor and privilege are out of place in a church that names me as Lord. Self-Seeking is out of place in a church founded on my sacrifice. The road to the cross leads in a totally different direction than the world's path. Following me basically involves getting over yourself. There's a better way to go. The Jesus way of self-giving servanthood.

You know, this isn't the only place Jesus taught this Kingdom of God mindset to his disciples. We see him impressing this on his disciples and John 13, the night before he was crucified. He washed their feet, which was the job of a servant in those days. And he said to them, "Do you understand what I've done for you? You call me teacher and Lord; you're right, I am. If I, then, your teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you an example, and blessed are you if you do this." Did you catch that last line? "Blessed, are you if you do this." There's a blessedness in abundant life to be found in washing feet with Jesus and getting over oneself and seeking the interests of others. Keep in mind, this is the risen Christ. God's affirmed him making this promise, we can take him at his word. Unfortunately, many do not, and they're missing out on the real life with Jesus. Joe Briscoe writes, "There are too many Christians who say, I don't do feet. We do church. We do Bible study. We do club programs. We do solos. We do comedies. But we don't and won't do feet. Sad."

Permit me to ask you a personal question. Do you do feet as a follower of Jesus? You know you can with God's help and the Holy Spirit working in you. It won't be perfect on this side of Heaven, but you can be a servant. Imagine how great it would be if each one of us opted for this mindset in our lives, starting each day with a prayer asking "Lord, who do you want me to serve today? Help me to see that." Or asking, "What can I do for my church or family?" instead of wondering, "What have you done for me lately?" What have we committed, for instance, ourselves to serving others around us with our ears? It's really quite simple. Listening to each other – listening is such a valuable service we can give. Or what if we gave our eyes to serving, looking at people, closely observing them, showing love and concern for others in our looking? What if we committed to using our mouths to encourage and build up and guide others? Everyone can use that. And what if we used our hands to help and our feet to go to others, or for

others, even though it might be inconvenient or uncomfortable? We can do these things. It's what Jesus calls us to.

I want to close with this story Dr. Howard Hendricks, Bible teacher and pastor, tells. He says:

I was ministering in Fourth Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and we had a Thursday morning father-son breakfast, 6:30. It was over by quarter of eight. There were many people from the military, quite a few people from various government offices, some craftsmen, laborers of all kinds. It was quite a mix. After I had finished speaking and the meeting was dismissed, I looked over to my right and there was Senator Mark Hatfield stacking chairs and picking up napkins that had fallen on the floor. Ladies and gentlemen, if you are impressed that you're a United States senator, you don't stack chairs and pick up napkins. If you're impressed that your God's gift to the body of Christ as the great preacher of this age, you don't stoop to serve. And if you're impressed that you're the greatest thing that ever happened in your local church, you don't serve. You live to be served.

And I would add to Hendricks' statement, "and you are missing the boat." So get over yourself. Friends, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are first and foremost called to get over yourself and be a servant like Jesus, walking in his footsteps. Walking in the footsteps of the servant king, who came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for us. That's following Jesus. Let's pray.

Oh, God help us to be masters over ourselves so that we may be servants of others.

Amen.