

**The Meaning of Discipleship**                      **Daniel Cote**  
**Second Congregational Church**                      **10/20/24**

Scripture Reading        Mark 10:32-34

Sermon Text                Mark 10:35-45

A young couple had their first baby. After bringing her home from the hospital, the wife suggested to her husband that he try his hand at changing diapers. "I'm busy," he said. "I'll do the next one." The next time the baby was wet, she asked if he was ready to learn how to change diapers. He gave her a puzzled look and finally said, "I didn't mean the next diaper; I meant the next baby!" Sometimes, that is how Christians approach their walk with Christ. It is easy to delay (there is always a reason to put things off), but we need to remember that time will not go on forever, and one day, we will stand before Jesus to give an account of our lives.

We will get to our sermon text, but first, we will need some background and context. My students and some of you have asked me, Why did the Pharisees, who were the teachers of Israel, not recognize that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God to save their nation? The answer can be found in their hardness of heart and their deficient view of the Messiah's mission on Earth described in the Messianic prophecies.

In early September, I preached on the transfiguration of Jesus, where Jesus' divine nature was made plain to Peter, John, and James, who were Jesus' inner circle disciples. God accomplished several things at the transfiguration. First, the transfiguration of Jesus affirmed the divinity of Jesus in a visible way for the disciples and, furthermore, that He was the Messiah sent by God. Second, it was the Father's way of preparing Jesus in His frail human form and encouraging Jesus as He approached Jerusalem. Just as He had done at His baptism, God validated and voiced His approval of Jesus' ministry as He was about to face suffering and crucifixion. Third, with Moses representing the Law and Elijah representing the prophets, the transfiguration event shows the impending fulfillment of God's salvation plan for humanity described in the OT Law and Prophets. In the ministry of Jesus, the Law and the Prophets were about to be fulfilled by His death and resurrection. Immediately following the transfiguration, Luke tells us in his Gospel (Luke 9:51) that Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem to complete His salvation mission on Earth.

In the Gospel of Mark, the events of the Transfiguration are described in the beginning of Mark 9. Immediately following the Transfiguration, Jesus rejoins His disciples and tells them in Mark 9:13, "...it is written of the Son of Man that He will suffer many things and be treated with contempt." The Transfiguration is believed to have occurred at Mount Tabor in Northern Israel. From there, Jesus and the disciples made their way south along the journey that will bring them to Jerusalem.

As Jesus made His way through Galilee, He again taught His disciples about His impending suffering, saying in Mark 9:31, "...The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." You see, like the Pharisees, the disciples had a deficient understanding of the Messiah's mission because it did not include the truth of His suffering and death. The plain teaching of the OT, as we read in Isaiah 52 and 53, is that the Messiah needed to suffer and die for the people's sins. Yes, the Messiah is a great King, but the Pharisees had discarded all that suffering prescribed in the Messianic prophecies and myopically focused on the passages saying the Messiah would be a conquering king who would restore the Nation of Israel. That was the teaching Jesus' disciples had received prior to their meeting of Jesus. Jesus needed to teach His disciples the truth, so He hammered home the point that He would suffer and die.

The truth from the prophecies is that the Messiah needed to suffer and die to save the world; this was accomplished during Jesus' First Advent. Yes, it is true that the Messiah would be a conquering King, which will be accomplished at Jesus' Second Advent, described in the

Book of Revelation, when Jesus returns to purge evil from the world and establish the reign of God and His Son upon the Earth.

As we come to our Scripture reading in Mark 10, Jesus tells His disciples a third time on the road to Jerusalem, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles.<sup>34</sup> And they will mock Him and spit on Him, and flog Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise *from the dead*” (Mark 10:33–34). Here, Jesus prophesies the important detail that He would rise from the dead after three days.

I have provided you with context and backstory to our sermon text because it is after Jesus repeatedly told His disciples that His own people would betray him to suffer and die at the hands of the Romans that two of his closest inner circle disciples, James and John, went to Him to request seats at Jesus’ right and left hands when Jesus came into His glory. The astounding indifference, tone deafness, complete and utter selfishness, and lack of compassion on the part of James and John boggles the mind!

Imagine the situation in which you go to a dear and close friend to share the terrible news that you have just been diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer. You reveal to your friend as tears are streaming down your face that your prospects are grim because the cancer has metastasized throughout your body and that your death is imminent. What a heart-wrenching situation this is to contemplate, something that I pray never befalls any of us. Imagine after you reveal this that the first words out of the mouth of your dear friend were, “Could you will me your house, and while you are at it, can you tell your lawyer to put me first in line for your 401k and your car?” No doubt, in your anguish, suffering, and pain, you would write off your formerly dear friend as an insensitive jerk completely devoid of compassion to whom you would possibly never speak again. Think about our text for a moment. That is exactly what James and John do to Jesus.

James and John had spent three years with Jesus. Including Peter, they were His closest friends who were with Jesus at the greatest and most important moments of His ministry. They were among the earliest disciples of Jesus. They were eyewitnesses of the transfiguration. They were with Jesus when He raised Jairus’s daughter. They would be with Jesus for His most complete teaching about the end times on the Mount of Olives, and they would be with Jesus when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before He would be crucified.

James and John were close friends of Jesus, as close as you could get. Yet when Jesus told them that He was about to suffer and die, their insensitivity, indifference, and lack of compassion were astounding. In their defense, they probably didn’t fully understand what was about to happen, but they come across in our sermon text as complete, heartless jerks.

But this is one of those times when we see Jesus being Jesus, and His mercy and compassion are on full display. He uses the moment as a teachable moment that helps you, me, and all Christians understand what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus. No, Jesus does not rebuke James and John when they ask for the best seats, basking in His glory at His right and left hand. James and John did not understand what was involved in their ambitious request. Instead of a rebuke, Jesus asks them a question, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am to be baptized?”

So, what is this cup and baptism that Jesus is referring to? The cup was a Jewish metaphor for joy or the divine judgment of God against human sin. It could be good or bad. In Psalm 23:5, David writes, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.” Here, the cup is full, perhaps of new wine, and so it is a symbol of joy and plenty. On the other hand, we read in Zechariah 12:2 and other places that the cup symbolizes judgment, and that is what Jesus is applying to himself because, on the cross, he would bear God’s wrath and judgment for the sins of all humanity. On the

cross, Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath for the sins of each and every one of us. He willingly sacrificed His life to reconcile all who believe in Him to God.

Baptism involves immersion; in the OT, immersion under water involves calamity. Jesus would experience the calamity of God's judgment on human sin, which, of course, played out when He was nailed to a Roman cross for all of us who have gone astray. So, in summary, the cup that Jesus would drink and the baptism that He would undergo were horrific, and He did it all because He loves you, and He does not want any to perish, but that all would come to repentance for their sins and place their faith in Him.

James and John were oblivious. They did not know what they were asking for, but soon, they would know. Jesus tells them that they will indeed drink the cup that He drank and be baptized with the baptism with which He was baptized. James and John would suffer as Jesus suffered; like Jesus, there would be no glory without suffering. We know what happened to Jesus. Not long after Jesus' death on the cross, Herod had James, a prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem, killed by the sword to please the Jews. John, the prominent church leader and writer of the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, endured imprisonment and persecution at the hands of the Jews and the Roman Empire.

As to their request to sit at Jesus' right and left hand, Jesus tells them it was not His to give. Instead, those positions were for those whom the Father had selected. Jesus is fully human and fully God. At His First Coming, when He walked upon the Earth, He set aside and did not exercise His divine prerogatives. Thus, the knowledge of who would sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His resurrected glory was known only to God. James and John's positioning for power and glory set off the other disciples, who were indignant at their requests, which seems to indicate jealousy. Perhaps the others were indignant because they had not thought to pull Jesus aside to ask Him for special favors like James and John.

But Jesus used the moment to deliver one of the most powerful teachings on discipleship that served as a wake-up call to the first-century disciples and profoundly affects believers to this day. Jesus says in the final verses of our text,

Mark 10:42–45 (NASB 2020)

You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles domineer over them; and their people in high position exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup> But it is not this way among you; rather, whoever wants to become prominent among you shall be your servant; <sup>44</sup> and whoever wants to be first among you shall be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> 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.

Wow! When I first read that, it rocked my world, and it continues to resonate in my mind to this day, as it should in every one of you!

Jesus' teaching means the following for every one of us. The way of the world is not the way of God. The Romans were the great Gentile rulers of the day. They had great power and authority, domineering over the people, killing whoever stood against them, and crushing rebellion wherever it arose. Prominent worldly leaders had power and control over people. In contrast, prominent people in the kingdom of God serve others. The great in God's kingdom do not seek to be served but instead seek to serve others. God's kingdom is an upside-down kingdom. The great are not those who have power, position, and prosperity, but the great in God's kingdom are those who humble themselves and serve God and others. The best example of kingdom greatness is in the life of Jesus, who Paul describes in Philippians 2:7 as emptying or setting aside His divine prerogatives to take on human flesh and sacrifice his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus says that a disciple is not above His teacher (Matthew 10:24). If we truly aspire to follow Jesus as faithful disciples, we will be willing to live a life of service to God and others,

even to the point of sacrificing ourselves, our wellbeing, and our safety. The true disciple of Jesus will allow and invite the invasion of biblical truth into all aspects of their life. The true disciple of Jesus will be transformed, seeking in everything they do to be more like Christ. The true disciple of Christ possesses the mind of Christ, as Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 2:16, and will share in Christ's mission, purposes, and perspectives.

Being a true disciple of Jesus cannot be accomplished by attending church for one hour on Sunday morning and forgetting about Jesus for the rest of the week. True disciples are all in. If that seems too much, consider how Jesus suffered for you. Jesus gave up His life out of love for you so you could have eternal life in heaven. What have you done to show your genuine love for Him?

There are important applications in our sermon text that we do not want to miss. First, our Lord is gracious to James and John in their selfish request. He does not repudiate, shun, or castigate them. His response to them is gentle and reveals the correct nature of how disciples of Christ will use their words and control their tongues. How many of us would have done the same? As I mentioned earlier, if we were about to die, and all our best friends could think about was inheriting our stuff, we would have been angered and severed the relationship. Likely, we would have lashed out at our friend's insensitivity. We could all benefit from patterning our interactions with others after Jesus' example. Before we speak, we should always consider how we would feel if the words we are about to utter were spoken to us. It is unlikely that we would speak words hurtful to ourselves, so in this way, we will guard ourselves from speaking hurtful or harsh words to others.

Second, like many people in the world today, including Christians, in seeking glory, James and John selfishly made the mistake of patterning themselves after the great worldly leaders of their day, who were destined to perish. They were seeking to be like the Pharisees and the Roman leaders who sought after position, power, prosperity, and glory for themselves, whereas they should have been seeking to pattern themselves after Jesus, who gave up His glory to save others. There is nothing wrong in aspiring to greatness, for when the true disciple of Jesus aspires to greatness, he or she will be driven to serve others just as Jesus did and to advance His kingdom.

As disciples of Jesus, we must be careful not to get caught up in the allure of the world and the things the world associates with greatness. Paul tells us in Second Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive compensation for his deeds *done* through the body, in accordance with what he has done, whether good or bad." As we stand before Jesus to give an accounting for our deeds done in service to Him, He will not be impressed by our prosperity, position, or worldly power because He had none of these. Instead, He will want to hear of how we served Him, how we loved others, and what we did to spread the gospel and grow His kingdom. Jesus will want to hear about what we did as disciples to glorify Him and His Father.

Finally, we must never forget who we are in Christ. The power, prestige, and prosperity the world offers are fleeting, but the love of God for His children is eternal. I didn't know who Liam Payne was until this week when I saw his name appear on every news website I looked at. Payne was a singer-songwriter who rose to fame at 18 in the British boyband One Direction, promoted by Simon Cowell. Payne had it all, it seemed: good looks, fame, prestige, and a vast fortune. As humans often do, he fell into substance addiction. And recently, he was dropped by the record label he joined when he launched his solo career at the age of 22. Tragically, four days ago, after exhibiting days of erratic behavior, at age 31, Liam Payne died after falling or jumping from the balcony of a five-star hotel in Buenos Aires. His hotel room was trashed and filled with drug paraphernalia.

When your self-image is rooted in what you do, what you possess, and your physical appearance, when those things fail, you will enter a maelstrom that will destroy you. The things of the world are fleeting, but the things of God are eternal. If your self-image is rooted in the fact that you are a child of the eternal God and a disciple of Jesus, no matter what befalls you, you have God to sustain you. In Christ, you stand on the solid rock, not the shifting sands of the world. In Christ, you have assurance of eternity in His presence as your destiny.

In John 3:16, a verse that many of us have memorized, Jesus says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life." If anyone hearing this does not know Jesus, you need to believe in him because He is your only hope of eternal life. And for all who are disciples of Jesus, we need to dwell on who we are in Christ. We need to ponder the depth and breadth of the love of our God. We need to internalize the great truth of God's love for us, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, who is alive in us, we need to let the love of God completely transform us and conform everything we do and say to the example of Jesus. Amen.