

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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WHOEVER DESIRES TO BECOME GREAT

Mark 10:32-45

In the last two lessons, we looked at the meaning of Jesus' teaching concerning the first-and-last principle. In Matthew 19:30 and 20:16, He said that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Today we will continue to examine this principle and we will use the parallel passage in Mark. Mark 10:32-45. This is what we read.

Mark 10:32. And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking on ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were fearful. And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him,

33 saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles.

34 "And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again."

35 And 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."

36 And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

37 And they said to Him, "Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on Your left."

38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

39 And they said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.

40 "But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

41 And hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.

42 And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to 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.

43 "But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant;

44 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.

45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Amazed and fearful

I would like you to notice the two words used to describe the people who were walking with Jesus. Verse 32: *they were **amazed**, and those who followed were **fearful**.* Amazed and fearful.

What was it that filled the disciples with amazement and fear? Here is the explanation that you will find in many commentaries: The Lord Jesus and the disciples were on the road to Jerusalem. The disciples were fully acquainted with the dangers of going to that city. Some time before this, they had despaired of Jesus' life when He had proposed to go even into Judea. They said to Him in John 11:8, *Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone You, and are You going there again?* So the disciples were amazed at Jesus' readiness to go up to Jerusalem when He knew what would happen there, that the religious leaders, who had so often sought to kill Him, would then do it. Their amazement increased when Jesus told them specifically in v. 33 that the chief priests and the scribes *will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles*. 'I'm going to be mocked. I'm going to be put to shame. I'm going to be killed. My friends, my time with you is short. Soon I will be gone.'

And if the disciples were afraid, it was for their own safety. Being Jesus' followers, they knew that they will be exposed to the same dangers if they set foot in Jerusalem.

Now personally, I don't find that explanation too convincing. Why were the disciples amazed and fearful? It cannot have been merely that Jesus was going up to a hostile Jerusalem, for this He had done before. He has been in Jerusalem before. Also this was the third time that Jesus told His disciples about his impending death. In Mark 8:31 and 9:30-31 we read that Jesus *began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again*. But I wonder how much the disciples understood that. I am not sure that they grasped Jesus' prediction of His death when they heard it the third time. Did they really think that Jesus could be killed in going to Jerusalem?

In the parallel passage to Mark 10:33, i.e. in Luke 18:34, we are told that the disciples had no clue what Jesus was talking about. Luke 18:34 reads like this.

Luke 18:34: But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken.

Jesus had just described his rejection by the religious leaders and predicted His own resurrection. And then, Luke tells us that the disciples were unable to perceive these things. If they did not get it, how can we say that they were amazed and fearful that Jesus so steadfastly headed toward Jerusalem where He would expose himself to great dangers?

But what is it that they did not understand? Is it that Jesus' language was unintelligible? Surely it was not that they could not understand the words. The Son of Man will be delivered to the Gentiles. The Son of Man is the one title that Jesus always used of Himself. He is the man of God's purpose, the man that God has appointed to rule over the world. People will mock Him, insult Him, spit on Him, scourge Him and finally kill Him. This is not difficult to understand. The language is as plain as it can be.

So what did the disciples not understand? Well, they could not understand why it was necessary for Jesus to die. They could not grasp how His death could fit into their understanding of the divine plan of salvation. You see, when we study the Bible, the hardest part is often not about understanding the words themselves. The hardest part is accepting how God's plan works.

We have been studying in the last two lessons, and this is the third one, this principle about the first being last and the last being first. Do you understand it? How does that fit into your life? What difference does it make? Some people can listen to the preaching of the word of God week after week for years and yet it does not make any difference in their lives.

In Mark 10:34, Jesus had one encouraging word. Three days after His death, He will rise. What does that mean? He will rise? Rise where? The disciples could not grasp that either.

As you know, when Jesus was put to death, the disciples never thought that He would rise again. They did not expect to see Him anymore. You remember that on the road to Emmaus, the disciples were saying to this stranger, 'We thought he was going to deliver Israel. But He got crucified' (Luke 24:20-21). For them, that was the end of this great man, and the end of their dream. All the words that Jesus had said about rising again did not register at all.

Who then can be saved?

Now here is my view on the disciples' feelings. I think that the words 'amazed and fearful' have to be linked, at least in part, to the larger context. In Mark, these words follow immediately the Lord's discussion with the rich young ruler. Notice that twice in that passage, Mark mentions that the disciples were amazed. The first time is in v. 24. It says that *the disciples were amazed at his words* when Jesus said *How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God* (v. 23). The second time is in v. 26 where we read that *The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"* after Jesus' statement that *it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God* (v. 25). They were staggered by such words of Jesus.

That amazement was not just a temporary one. Jesus' words were still ringing in their ears up until Mark 10:32. They were still amazed at that point. Verse 32, in fact, is just the continuation of the previous section. Observe this. In v. 17 of Mark 10, we read, *And as He was setting out on a journey ... to Jerusalem.* That is when the rich man spoke to Jesus about inheriting eternal life. By this time, the Lord was on a journey, walking towards Jerusalem. Now in v. 32, fifteen verses later, Jesus and the disciples *were on the road.* They were continuing that journey to Jerusalem. You can see that it is all part of the same incident, one event following the other. The disciples had just listened to Jesus speaking to the rich young ruler, and His words were still in their minds. Three times in this section we read that they were amazed (vv. 24, 26, 32).

And they were also getting scared. They were fearful. Up to that point, they were feeling self-assured about getting eternal life, which is the question that the rich young ruler had asked. But now, with Jesus' answer, they began to feel much less certain. They began to realize that entering the kingdom of God is 'hard,' the word Jesus used (vv. 23, 24). It is 'hard' especially for a rich man. This caused them to ask in v. 26, *Who then can be saved?* You see, the Lord Jesus was never afraid to shake people's sense of security, even to the point that the disciples were now afraid.

So *they were amazed, and those who followed were fearful.* Notice the words 'those who followed.' This implies that some did not follow. Some followed, and some did not follow Jesus. It also implies that the teaching of Jesus was rather hard to take.

Many times in the Gospels, we find disciples who decided to stop following Jesus. We read at the end of John 6 for example that some disciples could not accept the Lord's teaching about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. And so they left Him. Here too in Mark 10:32, they found that His teaching was difficult. 'If being saved is as hard as this, well, it is better that we no longer walk with Him.' But there were those who still followed, with fear.

Drinking the cup

And as though their fear was not bad enough, Jesus went on to speak about the sufferings He would face in Jerusalem and the death He knew awaited Him. But it seems that James and John found the subject too dreary. 'Let's talk about something more positive. We want to ask you something, Jesus. You just said that because we have followed You, then when You will sit on your throne, we will have our own thrones and You will give us the authority to judge the twelve tribes of Israel

(Matthew 19:28). So this is our request: Grant us, my brother and I, the top positions in your kingdom.'

After all this talk about the first being last and the last being first, it was evident that James and John did not understand the principle. Here they wanted to be first. They wanted to be right next to Jesus in position of influence and power.

Jesus said, 'You don't know what you are talking about. Let Me tell you something. Let Me go back to the principle I just taught you. If you want to go to that height, you must first go down. The way up is to go down. How to do that? Well, the way to do it is to drink the cup that I drink and to have the baptism that I have. Can you do that?' 'Yes, no problem,' they said.

The cup is sometimes used in the OT as a metaphor of blessings (Psalm 16:5; 23:5; 116:13), but more often for judgment (Psalm 75:8; Jeremiah 25:15-29; Ezekiel 23:31-34). In the latter sense, it usually denotes the punishment of the wicked, but it can also be used of the suffering of God's people (Isaiah 51:17-23; Lamentation 4:21). Here the context requires that it be understood of the suffering rather than of punishment.

What about baptism? This is not an allusion to Christian baptism. It is the baptism that Jesus had already spoken to the disciples in Luke 12:50: *But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!* Here the term 'baptism' picks up the OT imagery of floods for persecution or judgment (Psalm 18:4-6; 42:7; 69:1-2; Isaiah 8:7-8; 30:27-28; Jonah 2:3-6). The point of the metaphor is that Jesus will be 'inundated' with God's judgment, an allusion to rejection and persecution.

So the cup and baptism both symbolize intense suffering. If James and John understood the imagery, their prompt response sounds thoughtless. But there is no reason to think that it was insincere. Jesus takes their response at face value and His prediction that they will actually 'drink His cup' and 'be baptized with His baptism' will eventually be fulfilled in James' martyrdom (Acts 12:2). What happened to John is not as clear. Tradition has it that in his old age, John was a prisoner on Patmos *because of the word of God and testimony of Jesus* (Revelation 1:9).

Being last: becoming a servant to all

We see in v. 41 how this desire to get positions of highest honor created tension and irritation among the disciples. Look at v. 41. *And hearing this, the ten began to feel **indignant** with James and John.* The ten were indignant with James and John. 'What right do you have to request such a thing? You do not deserve a higher position than any of us.' Jealousy, pride, self-centeredness, and bitterness bred within the heart of each against the two. Perhaps even hatred was being expressed. The cohesiveness of the band of disciples and the very work of the Lord was being threatened. And we find too that in the church or in the world or in the family, when people put themselves first, their own desire first, their own like first, there will be tension.

Seeing what was happening, the Lord Jesus repeats, in v. 42 onward, the important principle that we have been studying in the last two lessons, the principle of the first and the last. He said, 'Don't be like the leaders of the world. You know what happens in the world. The world has leaders who 'lord it over them' and 'exercise authority over them.' These two verbs in Greek (*katakuriueo*; *katexousiazō*) are both compounds beginning with *kata*, which means 'down.' Jesus was saying that the leaders in the world use their position at the top to 'bear down on' those below them in the social scale. This is seen in every society because man naturally likes to assert a preeminence. We all want to be great. We all want to be influential.

It shall not be so among you, Jesus said. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (vv. 43-44).

'The person in your midst who wants to be great must make the fundamental decision to be the servant of all the rest of you. For the way to be great in the kingdom is to be last. It is to become a servant to all.'

In Mark 9, the Lord Jesus has already taught the disciples the first-last principle when they were arguing as to who was the greatest. Notice what He said in v. 35 of Mark 9. *If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all.* There He tells us what 'last of all' means. It means 'servant of all.' That is exactly what He is saying now in chapter 10. To be last is to serve. You are last when you become the servant of all. In the kingdom, if you want to be great, you must accept to be a servant for everyone.

You see how the first-last principle faces us with a decision. You either choose to be first or you choose to be last. Your choice is either to be served or to serve. Or, as the Lord Jesus put it in another place, it is either to save your life or to lose it. To keep your life or to lose it. And Jesus exhorts us to choose to be a servant to all. He asks us to choose to be last.

In fact, so seriously does Jesus take this idea of service that He uses His own death to motivate it. Verse 45.

Mark 10:45. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Here the Lord gave the example of Himself. Think about this. When we look at the life of Jesus, we are struck by one thing. He never did anything for Himself. He was always doing things for other people. Look at the temptation. The whole point of the temptation was to get Jesus to do something for Himself. 'You are hungry? Turn the stone into bread.' Jesus would not do it. He could do it but He would not do it. His whole life was lived for others. He used His power in the service of others. And His greatest service was to give His life to set us free from our bondage to sin. No ministry is lowlier than to die for sinners.

The sentence in v. 45 is an argument of the 'how much more' type. It could be rephrased in this way: Even Jesus came not to enjoy the service of others, but to accept a lowly servant's place, how much more His servants! He who is a disciple of Christ must follow the lifestyle of giving of his Master.