

How Far Does Your Connection Reach?

Mark 10:32-45

Introduction - Doing the Two Step

A young girl comes home from primary school and tells her mum and little brother that she was learning five-finger typing in class. The little brother says, "That's nothing, I haven't had any classes and I'm already down to two fingers."

Have you ever been in that position where you think that you're making good progress only to realise that you still have a long way to go? Former Australian fast bowler, Merv Hughes says that he was getting a reputation in his teens for his speed but when he was invited to try out for a senior team at club level the experienced wicket keeper stood up to the stumps (where a keeper stands for a slow bowler) for the whole try out and Merv realised that he still had a long way to go to be a top-class fast bowler.

This experience is also not unusual for musicians where an aspiring musician thinks they're ready for a breakthrough only to see a truly amazing performance by another musician which sends them back to their practice rooms. The barber in my old home town, Mudgee, used to sell harmonicas and he told the story of a harmonica playing competition only for the first person drawn to begin the competition playing so well that all the other harmonica players packed up their instruments and went home.

Where else may we experience this dawning awareness that while we've made progress we still have a long way to go? How many dads think that they're getting this parenting thing under control only for our wives to go away for a weekend and we wonder what she could have slipped into the kids food to turn them into little monsters for the whole time she was away. Surely it couldn't be that we still have a lot more to learn about the little horrors ... sorry, little darlings?

This awareness of growing but needing more growth can also be seen in our spiritual lives. We're going to see that the disciples were making progress in following Jesus but they still had a long way to go.

Jesus Clarifies Again What Identity With Him Means (vv. 32-34)

We concluded last week noticing that the disciples had thrown in their lot with Jesus and sought to be identified with him. Peter had said, “We have left everything to follow you!” We are now going to see more clearly where following Jesus will take them.

Jesus and the disciples are travelling to Jerusalem, the spiritual and political epicentre of the Jewish people. We read, “They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.” It seems that there’s something about the way in which Jesus is leading the way that the disciples know that he’s up to something and they’re both astonished by his authority and presence as well as afraid. Perhaps the picture is of the disciples being somewhat awestruck.

Jesus decides that now is a good time to teach his disciples and to make exceedingly clear what he faces by going to Jerusalem.

Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ‘We are going up to Jerusalem,’ he said, ‘and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.’

We have already heard much of this before but this time Jesus gives more details about his upcoming death. In particular, the mention of Jesus being handed over to the Gentiles means that he will be thoroughly rejected as the Jewish Messiah. However, if we’re looking at the disciples growth and development, will we witness any greater understanding on this occasion of Jesus describing his approaching death than there has been in the past? Previously in chapter 8 the disciples, led by Peter, had flat out rejected the idea of Jesus being betrayed and dying and then in chapter 9 they didn’t understand and were afraid to ask. What’s their response this time?

John and James Grasp Part of Identifying with Jesus (v. 35-40)

We read of the response of two of the disciples in verses 35-40:

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask.’

‘What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked.

They replied, ‘Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.’

‘You don’t know what you are asking,’ Jesus said. ‘Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?’

‘We can,’ they answered.

Jesus said to them, ‘You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.’

Yes, there is actually growth here! It appears that James and John had heard Jesus describing that after three days he would rise and they believed it and wanted to be in on the action.

This is part of what marks this story out as different to the last time the disciples had been arguing about being the greatest in chapter 9 verses 33-37. Back then Jesus had described his approaching death and rising again but the disciples had not understood about the resurrection and basically just thought about his death with the result being that they wanted to know who the greatest was to be next in line. This time, James and John hear about death and resurrection and they realise that a resurrection must mean glory and victory and so they want to be first in line to be a part of this. Specifically, they want the positions of great authority, to the left and right of Jesus as the ruling Messiah.

Jesus, in response to the request of James and John, recognises their faith and insight and so doesn’t shoot them down in flames but in stead asks them if they’re willing to undergo the sufferings which are represented in the images of drinking the cup and receiving the baptism which Jesus will experience.

If you remember, back in chapter 1 Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist for the forgiveness of sins even though Jesus didn't have any sins to ask forgiveness for. Jesus received that baptism to indicate his identity with the people of Israel. I'm quite comfortable with a number of forms of baptism which is used in churches but one of the images I like about full-immersion baptism is that of the person dying with Christ and then rising again in new life.

However, while baptism can represent both an identifying with the other as well as a dying to self, the image of the cup is more strongly associated with suffering and, in particular, receiving God's wrath and punishment for sin and rebellion against him. This is why later, in Mark 14 we read of Jesus praying in verses 33 to 36 as he faces his imminent arrest and death,

He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.'

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'

The cup which Jesus has is the cup of suffering and it is so overwhelming that he wonders if he can bear it. Could James and John really share in this?

Back here in chapter 10 James and John declare that they can undergo such suffering and Jesus, perhaps having insight into the future of James and John or perhaps simply affirming the inevitability of suffering for the disciples, does confirm that they will endure suffering but he wasn't the person who would make the decision as to who sits on his left or right.

It would seem that we have in James and John an example of making progress in following Jesus. James and John recognise, even if they don't fully grasp it, that Jesus' death is not going to be the end of the story but that there will be a glorification with Jesus having a kingly reign. Not only that, perhaps James and John had finally taken in the example of John the Baptist being beheaded by Herod as well as Jesus'

teaching about the inevitability of persecutions for those who would follow him and were prepared to accept this.

One of the good things about reading through Mark's Gospel and seeing the progression of the disciples following Jesus is that it helps us to see that change is very rarely instantaneous. With the disciples there are sometimes bursts of insight and understanding but at other times this can be very slow to develop. Isn't that also true for us? For those of us who have followed Jesus for a while can you recognise times in your life when you likewise experienced significant growth in knowing Jesus and following him more closely? We can give thanks for such times of intense growing but we should also give thanks for the slow and steady growth which God brings about and which can be almost imperceptible from one day to the next but which build up over time.

True Identity With Jesus is Seen in Service (v. 41-45)

However, in turning back to James and John, yes we see progress in their following of Jesus but in their aspiring for positions of authority did they also demonstrate that there was still much more growth that was still required. It is to the area that still needs growth that we turn now.

Check out the disciples' reaction to the request of James and John in verse 41, "When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John." Why were the ten indignant? Because they wanted the key positions of authority! How dare James and John sneak in there with the request which we want to make of Jesus?

Yes, James and John and maybe the other disciples had got more of an idea of Jesus' coming glory as well as the sufferings which were part of being a follower of Jesus but did they really understand what greatness in the coming kingdom would look like? Jesus sees that there is still more growth required and so teaches them how his kingdom is to be different from those with authority in this world.

Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with

you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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.’

Jesus is effectively cautioning his disciples not to strive to be like those whom they despised. Almost all the Jews hated being under the authority of the Gentiles, the non-Jewish Romans, but by their clambering for positions of authority the disciples were indicating that they had a similar outlook to their Roman rulers who held that those who had positions of high status deserved, and could demand, compliance to their will from others.

In contrast to the Gentile rulers, followers of Jesus are to be characterised by serving one another. We’re called to pray for people in authority, what does it mean to pray for those in authority to be servants? Our country and political system is far from perfect but one of the positive of our Judaeo-Christian heritage is a strong expectation that politicians are to serve the country and her people. It is called corruption when politicians use their position for personal gain. We should indeed pray for our politicians and others in authority that they would lead with integrity as well as with humility and a willingness to serve those in their electorate.

However, it’s one thing to talk about those in authority as people who should serve others but what about us? Who do you serve? Also, Jesus words here are that “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.” Is there a way in which you are serving within this church community? I’m thankful for the people who bless our church in a myriad of ways. Some people serve by seeking to make sure that you feel welcome when you arrive, others bless us with their musical and singing abilities, others help us by providing morning teas. We’re thankful for those who help our church with maintenance and repair tasks, as well as for those serve by giving particularly generously to make sure our ministries can develop. Our Councillors and Elders give of themselves for the sake of others, and so the list could go on.

Perhaps you’re sitting here and you’ve never really become involved in our church yet or maybe you just took a break and that break seems to have stretched on

for quite a while. I would really like to encourage you to pray and think about how you could serve this church - serving one another - if you don't already.

Jesus The Greatest Example of Service (v. 45)

Finally, this little section concludes by showing the depth of service which Jesus goes to for us. "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." Jesus not only sets us an example of service but his service goes far beyond any service we can ever do. Jesus serves by giving up his life as a payment for a debt which we can't pay ourselves.

As mentioned earlier, this picks up the cup imagery that Jesus was using earlier and this was not a concept just dropped out of the blue but rather was a fulfilment of what had been promised in the Old Testament. This is the reason why we had the reading from Isaiah 53 earlier. Isaiah wrote around 700 years before Jesus came and yet listen to these words:

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Jesus' death is presented with a variety of explanations in Scripture (such as an example for us, which is also seen here, as the one conquering death, etc.) but one emphasis is what we read about here and that is of Jesus' death being a ransom payment. Payments were made to rescue people from prison, from slavery and from other such circumstances. The picture is that Jesus knowingly will surrender his life for the sake of others who cannot rescue themselves ... for the sake of us who cannot save ourselves.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reality of what Jesus has accomplished for us should not only inspire us for service but it also frees us for service. We don't serve others or the

church with any fearful wondering as to whether we've done enough, we serve in the joyful freedom that we have been bought with a price and so our position in Jesus' kingdom is secure.

Let us live, love and serve in the truth of this.

[pray to close and encourage people to think of ways to serve our church and community as they sing the next song]