



GETTING TO THE TOP IN THE KINGDOM

Isaiah 66:18-24, Romans 12:1-2, Mark 9:33-10:16

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In Mark 9:33-10:16 we find Jesus and his disciples *on the way*¹ to the capital city, Jerusalem. Twice already, Jesus has stated clearly the purpose of the trip: he's going to be rejected and killed by Jerusalem's leaders, and then to rise again from the dead. But Jesus' disciples have a different vision. They're thinking what we're thinking whenever there's talk of a courageous reformer "on the road to Washington," campaigning for the presidency or a congressional seat, and promising a new and improved government. The disciples are following Jesus to Jerusalem anticipating that Jesus will become king, and they will become his senior officials.

Ironically, Jesus *does* intend to give his disciples leadership roles in his kingdom, though it won't be at all what they're expecting. In any case, while *on the way* to Jerusalem, Jesus teaches his disciples a new way of leading by serving. The last thing Jesus wants when he gets to Jerusalem is to topple the current administration and install a new one with exactly the same DNA. That's why he's teaching them a fundamentally different way to lead.

One of the clichés we've come to expect with each modern election season is a critique of the Washington insider. Challengers criticize incumbents as career politicians, while presenting themselves as hard-working, self-made, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" kinds of leaders, untainted by years inside the beltway. As Americans, we can't help pulling for underdogs and Cinderellas. But do we really want an entirely clean slate of inexperienced legislators? What's frustrating about the "Washington insider" motif is that it distracts us from the real issue, which is the politician's character. It's not about how long a person has lived and served in Washington. Rather, it's about a fundamental orientation of selflessness. Are politicians in it for themselves or for those whom they serve? We need mature leaders who do the right thing rather than what is most likely to get them reelected.

The same is true for every profession. We need teachers, accountants, nurses, architects, etc. who do the right thing in their jobs, coming to serve rather than to be served. Likewise, in all the roles we play in society, as parents and children, husbands and wives, citizens and neighbors. In all of our interactions, are we selfish or selfless? Do we choose what is right, or what is most expedient?

This lesson is about getting to the top in God's kingdom. Which path will we choose? The one that goes up, or the one that goes down? As we'll discover, Jesus invites us to follow him on the right path—and one that we weren't at all expecting.

¹ "On the way" is an oft-repeated expression in Mark, especially in Mark 8-10.

THE WAY OF THE PHARISEES OR THE WAY OF JESUS

In Mark 10:1-12, the Pharisees reappear after having been absent for several chapters. The Pharisees typify what we've come to despise about hardened, self-serving career politicians. It's infuriating when leaders entrusted with the precious gift of elected office squander that gift, twisting it into a means for their own privilege and pleasure. That's like what the Pharisees were doing, particularly in the case of divorce. They had been given the wonderful, precious gift of God's word in the Old Testament, but they were squandering it, twisting it for their own benefit, so that they could completely abandon their wives on a whim, leaving them penniless and at the mercy of a misogynist culture.

God's word teaches that marriage is the sacred union of a man and a woman, joined together by the Lord. Since marriages are forged by God, we mustn't break them apart. But God has provided divorce as a last resort, for those who have suffered persistent, unrepentant abandonment, abuse or adultery.² Every married couple faces challenges from time to time, and in the vast majority of cases, the D-word should never be thought or spoken. But in rare instances of abandonment, abuse or adultery, God says that divorce is the right thing to do. Indeed, God himself divorced Israel for this very reason after centuries of infidelity.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees knew the Old Testament well, better than most anyone else alive. They had studied it backwards and forward. But they had stopped treasuring it as God's gift to them. They weren't using it as a means to grow closer to God. Instead, they became adept at twisting it for their own selfish ends. Because people around them didn't know the Scriptures as well as they did, common folk tended to go along with whatever the Pharisees said.

There once was a man who went to seminary and then returned to his hometown, where he started dating a teenage girl from his church. When he took her back to his apartment to sleep with her, she asked him, "Shouldn't we wait until we're married?" He quoted part of 1 Cor 6:12 to her: *All things are lawful for me*. He twisted the verse into justifying precisely the opposite of its meaning, namely prohibiting sexual sin. He convinced her that sex outside of marriage was perfectly okay. It was the worst possible use of the Bible—justifying sin—and he knew it was wrong.

That's just like what the Pharisees were doing with regard to divorce. They took the Old Testament's narrow, extraordinary exceptions—permitting divorce as a last resort in instances of abandonment, abuse and adultery—and the Pharisees widened them such that a man could divorce his wife for any reason. It's this despicable mindset that Jesus was up against in Mark 10.

We live in a culture that has followed in the way of the Pharisees. We marry and have children in pursuit of personal happiness, rather than in service to God and the world. So whenever spouses and kids don't please us, we see no reason not to break apart and go separate ways.

² See "Divorce: Lampooning God's Beautiful Story" from June 2, 2013 along with other messages about relationships on the sermons page at rezchurch.org. Notes from the message on divorce may be found at <http://rezchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Divorce-Lampooning-Gods-Beautiful-Story.pdf>.

Jesus invites us to join him *on the way* where we learn to put the needs of others ahead of our own. In Mark 10:9, he rebukes the Pharisees by reminding them that marriage is instituted by God, saying, “*What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*” For the Pharisees, who saw themselves as exceptional and entitled to do whatever they pleased, who could be more important than themselves? *Everyone*, says Jesus. First comes God himself, who bound you together with your spouse, then comes your spouse and children, and then your neighbors. After everyone else, feel free to “take care of number one.”

According what Jesus says here, there’s only one legitimate reason to get a divorce: if God wants it. Your spouse may be sick or poor, frustrating and sinful. For any number of reasons you may want to split. But what does God want? Again, God is *for* divorce only in cases of persistent, unrepentant abandonment, abuse or adultery. If it’s anything less than that, God wants you to stick it out and learn to love one another *on the way* with Jesus.

ROAD SIGNS IDENTIFYING THE WAY OF JESUS

Let’s step back and think about why Jesus’ teaching on divorce comes where it does, right in the middle of a two chapters talking about getting to the top in God’s kingdom. Mark didn’t compile stories about Jesus randomly. There’s a reason why he ordered them in the way that he did. And in this case, he did it to bring his readers—including you and me—to a fork in the road. With this teaching on divorce, Mark shows us two paths that lie before Jesus’ disciples: on the one hand, there’s the way of the present administration (e.g. the corrupt, self-serving Pharisees), whose leadership perpetuates injustice. On the other hand, there’s the way of the Lord, the righteous, suffering servant, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Which path will we choose?

In each of the other vignettes in Mark 9:33-10:16, Jesus gives us an image—a road sign, if you will—to identify his way, over and against the way of expedience and selfishness. As we look at these other vignettes, we’ll note the road signs that help us know which fork to take in order to stay *on the way* with Jesus.

The Road Sign in Mark 9:33-37. The first vignette is in 9:33-37, in which Jesus asks the disciples what they had been discussing (33) *on the way*. They should have been talking about the things that Jesus had taught them already, like faith and prayer.³ Instead, they were talking about who was the greatest. Picture them on the way to Jerusalem, anticipating regime change and arguing about who would be Jesus’ chief of staff.

Jesus gathered them, sat down to teach them, and said (35):

If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.

³ See “Ask the King,” a message on Mark 9:14-32, at <http://rezchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Ask-the-King-Mark-9%5E14-32-notes.pdf>

This is the same principle that Jesus taught his disciples with regard to divorce. One path is chosen for selfish reasons, the other selfless. Choose your path. Will you walk in the way of the world, clamoring for recognition and rank, or will you walk in the way of the Lord, where service is the mark of kingdom status?

Then Jesus took a child in his arms and said (37):

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.

We mustn't think that Jesus was being sentimental in embracing a child. Ancient cultures didn't adore infants like our culture does. Instead, Jesus chose the child as a symbol of the smallest and most insignificant member of society (perhaps the equivalent of a homeless person today). Jesus embraced the child saying, *when you do this, you're embracing me, and through me, God the Father himself.* Jesus' point was that his disciples should receive and embrace everyone, regardless of their social worth. He was not teaching us to become like little children or those without social standing in our culture. Rather, he was teaching us to become like one who embraces such little ones.

Do you see Jesus demonstrating the first road sign here? He's not acting like a child, but like a **nanny**—not just any kind of servant, but a caregiver who's tasked with caring for insignificant and unimportant people. There's nothing we can do that imitates God more than giving, and it's hard to imagine a job that calls on you to give more than that of a caregiver like a nanny. Think of all the jobs you could put on your resume as you vie for a cabinet position in the next administration. "Nanny" certainly isn't one of them. There's no glory in caregiving, whether for children, invalids, prisoners or outcasts. Yet in God's economy, it's his preferred method for changing the world. Receive and embrace the little ones, and watch what God does in and through them.

In a city where we build our professional networks even at church, there's no good reason to welcome and befriend those who aren't influential, or wealthy, or attractive. Yet Jesus asks it of us. Receive and embrace the little ones, and watch what God does in and through them.

So when you come to a fork in the road, and one path has you standing tall, while the other has you stooped to embrace a little one, looking like a nanny, then you'll know the way down is the way you should go.

The Road Sign in Mark 9:38-41. The second vignette begins with John's complaint about an independent exorcist who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. John said, "*We tried to stop him, because he was not following us,*" which is both comical and depressing. It's comical because of the preceding account (9:14-29) of the disciples' inability as exorcists. It's hard not to laugh at their desiring to prevent another man from doing what they were unable to do! On the other hand, it's a depressing complaint, because of the last vignette (9:33-37) regarding servant leadership. After hearing Jesus' previous rebuke, how could John immediately complain about a man who wasn't following him?

Jesus' responded by reminding the disciples to focus on the Christ rather than on themselves. In v 39 he says:

“Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

In other words, the man didn't need to be ministering in the *disciples'* name. The only thing that mattered was whether he was ministering in *Jesus'* name.⁴

Allegiance to Jesus is a vital lesson for all of us, especially in settings like ours where there are many other churches and ministries covering the same turf. The Lord has worked wonders in the Church of the Resurrection, and we have so much to be thankful for. We could easily fall into the trap of believing that everyone needs to be following us. Jesus reminds us, however, of the universal calling of all believers to ministry in *his* name. We must keep our eyes on him. When others do the same, we should rejoice in their partnership rather than grouse at the competition.

With this lesson in mind, Jesus gave his disciples another road sign to identify the way of the Lord. It's a tag that says **“Property of Jesus”** on it.

For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. (Mark 9:41 ESV)

When you're trying to climb to the top, you choose the path that gets your own name out there and distinguishes you from the crowd. But Jesus' school of leadership is different. He teaches us to join the path with the countless others who belong to him and who bear his name. His way isn't sexy or glamorous. In fact, it will become increasingly risky and dangerous for the disciples to bear his name. But in the end, it's the only name under heaven by which men and women may be saved. It's his name, not our own, by which we may enter the kingdom of God.

So when you come to a fork in the road, and one path has your own name up on a billboard, while the other is filled with people labeled “Property of Jesus,” then you'll know the way you should go.

The Road Sign in 10:13-16. In the last vignette, the disciples were rebuking people for bringing their children to Jesus. After having just taught the disciples about the importance of receiving and embracing little ones, Jesus was furious with them. So he said:

Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. (Mark 10:14-15 ESV)

Then he took the children in his arms and he blessed them. In so doing, he gave us a third road sign to identify the way of the Lord. This time it was a **child**. Think of a little one with arms stretched out, reaching up to Jesus to be picked up and blessed. According to Jesus, that's the posture for entering God's kingdom. You can't enter the kingdom if you try to receive it like an

⁴ In 9:14-29, the disciples failed because they were ministering in their own name rather than Jesus'.

adult, i.e. by talking or buying or thinking your way in. The only way to enter the kingdom is through utter dependency and need. Only if Jesus picks us up and carries us in to God's kingdom will we be able to enter it.

So when you come to a fork in the road, and the one path has you walking tall as an adult, but the other is one of humiliating dependency on the Lord, you'll know the way you should go.

LIVING SACRIFICES

Finally, we've seen from tonight's lesson these signs for staying *on the way* with Jesus, and they all seem to point down rather than up. So how then do we ever get to the top in God's Kingdom?

The "way of the Lord" is a common theme in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Isaiah.⁵ In Isaiah, the "way of the Lord" was code language describing how the Messiah someday would lead God's people in mission once again. Isaiah foretold a day when the Messiah would deliver God's people from exile, to himself, for the sake of the world. In this way, they would get back on track with God's original vision that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

In chapter 66, Isaiah ended his book with a vision of the triumph of the Messiah, who leads people from the four corners of the earth to the top of Mt. Zion.⁶ On that great day, God will vanquish the former regime, those selfish perpetrators of injustice, and their bodies will be thrown on the town garbage heap (Isa 66:24), to be eaten by the worms and burned with the trash. As for everyone else—people of every tribe and tongue—they will ascend to the top in order to become living sacrifices to the Lord.⁷ By dying to themselves and giving themselves fully to God in worship, they experience the joy of living with God forever in his eternal kingdom.

It was this vision that Jesus had in mind as he admonished his disciples in Mark 9:42-50 to get to the top by joyfully cutting off their hands and feet and by poking out their eyes. Of course he was using hyperbole, as he did so often. But just because he used hyperbole, don't think that his message wasn't true. What Jesus said in these verses makes all the sense in the world. In 9:43 he said that if your hand causes you to stumble⁸ (*on the way* of the Lord), then cut off your hand. It's

⁵ Isaiah seems to have been Mark's favorite Old Testament book, based on the number of times he quotes from it or alludes to it.

⁶ Note the picture of Pentecost in Isaiah 66:19-21 as Gentiles come from the four corners, and some of them even take up priestly roles as priests and Levites.

⁷ These living sacrifices are delivered to the temple by the means of enormous holy vessels: "*on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries*" Isa 66:20.

⁸ The ESV translates the Greek *skandalizo* as "sin," but "stumble" is a more literal rendering that better fits the theme of the way of the Lord.

better to enter God's kingdom with one hand, than to go to Gehenna⁹ with two. Again, in v. 45, Jesus said that if your foot causes you to stumble, then cut it off, because it's better to enter God's kingdom with one foot, than to go to Gehenna with two. Again, v. 47, he said that if your eye causes you to stumble, then gouge it out, because it's better to enter God's kingdom with one eye, than to go to Gehenna with two, where—Jesus here quoted the last line of Isaiah:

their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:48 ESV, quoting Isa 66:24)

See? It's simple economics. There's no greater reward than God's kingdom. Consequently, it's totally worthwhile to lose what is inessential in order to gain that which we value more than everything else in all the world.

Did you hear about the Vancouver biologist, Regine Gries, who allowed herself to be bitten by bedbugs 180,000 times—more than 1,000 times per week for five years—in order to conquer the global bedbug epidemic? Because of her literal blood, sweat and tears, there will be an inexpensive bedbug trap available by the end of 2015. When asked why she sacrificed her body in this way for so long, she replied, "knowing how much this will benefit so many people, it's all worth it." It was totally worth it to lose what was inessential in order to end a global epidemic.

Here again in Mark 9:42-50, Jesus shows us a fork in the road, and this time it's a matter of life and death. But as before, both options are camouflaged. The way that leads to death looks like really living it up, being served, hobnobbing with the elite, having your name up in lights, and walking tall. That's the old administration, the one that Jesus came to destroy, and is now in its death throes. Jesus say that this old way is the way that leads to death. If you choose that glittering path, you'll end up in the garbage pit rather than on the mountain top.

Then there's the other path, the way that leads to life that looks a lot like death. It's like being a nanny, remaining anonymous, and being as helpless as a child. Ultimately, it involves dying to self and becoming a living sacrifice, totally devoted to God. That's Jesus' way, the one that leads to the top, and it bears the sign of the cross.

Which path will you choose? Even the wisest of the wise struggle with this decision, as the ancient philosopher Plato once asked, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?"

In response, Jesus said, "if anyone would be first, he must be servant of all." That's how we get to the top in the kingdom of God.

⁹ The ESV translates the Greek *Gehenna* as "hell." This obscures an important connection. "Gehenna" was the garbage dump at the foot of Mt. Zion, where in their worst moments of idolatry the Israelites practiced child sacrifice. By Jesus' day it had become a symbol of the most accursed place in the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the two paths pictured in Mark's Gospel? Describe them. How are they disguised?
2. Contrast Jesus' and the Pharisees' views on divorce. Discuss how these opposing views depict the two paths. What advice would Jesus give a couple that is considering divorce for reasons other than persistent, unrepentant abandonment, abuse, or adultery?
3. Discuss the sign of the nanny or caregiver. How does it symbolize the way of the Lord? Where have you seen this sign at a fork in the road during the past week?
4. Discuss the "property of Jesus" sign. How does it symbolize the way of the Lord? Where have you seen this sign at a fork in the road during the past week?
5. Discuss the sign of the child. Distinguish between becoming like a child, and becoming childish. Which of these does Jesus want? Where have you seen this sign at a fork in the road during the past week?
6. Read Matthew 13:44-46. How do these parables reinforce Jesus' teaching about cutting off hands and feet, and gouging out eyes in Mark 9:42-50?
7. Discuss the antithesis between becoming the "living sacrifices" pictured in Isa 66:19-21 and Rom 12:1-2, and ending up in Gehenna, where Israelites once sacrificed their children (2 Kings 23:10, Jeremiah 32:35).
8. In what specific ways do you hope to follow in the way of the Lord in the week ahead? Pray with someone else about this.