



CLIMBING IN REVERSE

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As you heard, last night was the Men's Strategy Game Night at the Wittenbergs, which was billed as a night of alliances, defeat, conquest and deception. True colors were shown. I won't mention any names. All I know is if you're walking down the street and happen to meet a guy from New Day, you better watch your back...

We're wrapping up our time in the book of Matthew today, and I thought it would be fitting to end with the story of a strategy game that some of Jesus' disciples were playing for real. Not only was it some disciples – they made an alliance with their mom and pulled her into their scheme.

Speaking of moms – let me just squeeze in a quick plug for next week. When Karin and I lived in California, we went to church on Mother's Day, and the pastor had invited his wife to speak that morning, because he thought it would be better to hear from a mom than to preach at moms that day. She did an outstanding job and I thought that was a beautiful idea.

So we launched what has become a bit of our own New Day tradition on Mother's Day, hearing from different moms rather than talking about them or at them. This year, Kari Levang has agreed to speak, and I'm thrilled to hear what she has to say. Kari and Mike lead our high school ministry team and she's a fantastic teacher who is passionate about Jesus, so you will not want to miss it.

Back to this morning. The mom we're talking about today comes to Jesus with one thing on her mind.

Matthew 20:20-28

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

Before we go any further, let's stop for just a moment to take in the scene. It's really quite a jaw-dropping request. Just who does this woman think she is? By pulling together and cross checking references from all the gospels about the women who followed Jesus, scholars have concluded that Zebedee's wife, the mother of James and John, is none other than Salome, the sister of Mary, Jesus' mother. That would make her Jesus' Aunt Sal, along with his cousins, James and John.

Somehow or another, the three of them have managed to corner Jesus off by himself, away from the other disciples. Jesus isn't even close to setting up some earthly kingdom. But the rumors are flying, and already people are scrambling to be in on a piece of the action.

On The Biggest Loser this week, they were narrowing the field down to the final four contestants, and a father and son were jockeying to stay in the game by eliminating their strongest competition. The son said, "Everyone else is playing checkers while my dad is playing chess."

Aunt Sal is playing chess here. She's making her move early, before the other disciples have even entered the fray. It's a bold, calculated risk. But it's also misguided. So Jesus sets them straight.

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

Bring it on. Mark says Jesus nicknamed these two the Sons of Thunder, or the Thunder Twins as I like to call them, and you can see why. They make these loud, overconfident statements that are full of bravado. They're a couple of lovable tornadoes with bigger than life personalities.

Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, 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 by my Father."

That could have been the end of it. But somehow, word of this exchange leaked out.

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the 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 your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The news this week was filled with stories about Senator Arlen Specter switching from being a Republican to a Democrat. All the analysts were discussing what the 59th seat in the senate would do for Democratic control, and there was all kinds of speculation about how this calculated move was for Senator Specter's personal benefit as he faces reelection at almost 80 years old.

In sports this week was the story of a new book about A-Rod that's coming out, suggesting that he may have been using steroids as far back as high school to boost his performance. The Daily News reported that the book "offers an unflattering portrait of the MVP slugger as a needy personality who wanted his ego stroked constantly."

And then there was the conversation I had this week with a friend who is clashing with his ex-wife, who is making it as difficult as she can for him to share custody of their child.

All these stories share one thing in common with our text for today: the pursuit of power. Most of us probably don't feel like people of power, but we all try to get it in one way or another. Whether it is the power to keep a job, raise our earning potential, persuade people, make ourselves look good or get our own way at home, we all have this internal urge to increase the amount of influence we have. And at its heart, it is a pursuit of self interest over everything else.

And it goes deep -- clear back to Eve in the Garden of Eden. The devil knew just how to tempt her -- by offering her the chance for advancing and improving her lot in life.

Genesis 3:6

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

We look at something, see what it could do for us, and we want it. So we start scheming and strategizing on how we can make it ours. We know that a blatant grab won't be acceptable, so we make it sneaky. We disguise it a million ways and it comes out sideways. Sometimes we've pushed it down so far into our subconscious that we aren't even aware we're doing it, but it still shows up.

What does it look like? Here are some identifying markers from our story.

I can know I'm on a power trip when:

1. My request tells God what to do.

Salome wasn't really asking Jesus for help -- she was telling him to do what she wanted. "Give my boys the ultimate positions of power." There's no room for a creative response here. There's an arrogance in talking to God like that.

Sometimes we assume we have a full picture of God's will and that we know what would be best.

We think Salome seems so brash, but our prayers aren't always very different. O. Hallesby once wrote, "We think that we understand better than he does when and how our prayers should be answered. Without intending to do so, our prayers become a struggle with God. We make use of prayer to convince God that we see the matter in the right light, that the answer should be given immediately, and should be as we have planned it."

When our desire for control shows up in the way we're praying, "God, please do X for me," it's a good indication we're focused on increasing our own power over the situation.

Many of you are new to prayer. It's not something you have done often or regularly and you might think, "Well if I can't ask God for what I want, than how do I pray?"

When we ask for what we want, we are not concerned with God's will for us, so we often don't see those prayers answered, which leads to discouragement in prayer, which leads to less praying and stalls spiritual growth.

But when we bring our needs to God and don't tell him what to do, we find that he is more powerful than we had ever imagined, that he was already at work on our behalf, and that helplessness is our best friend in prayer.

2. God is a means to my end.

The mother of James and John starts out talking to Jesus about his kingdom, but only to provide the context for her request. She's not so much interested in what that kingdom will be like – only the opportunity it affords. It's just a way to get her sons where they want to be.

Have you ever called somebody up on the phone and pretended like you were calling to see how they were doing that you were interested in all the latest details of their life, when really you just wanted to ask them a favor, so the first 15 minutes of the conversation was just polite filler until you felt it was enough small talk to squeeze in your question without being obvious? That's treating them like a means to an end. And we do that with God all the time.

On September 8, 1869, a Portugese ship was trapped in a huge storm in the Indian Ocean. The sailors prayed fervently and promised to build a beautiful church if they made it to shore. Soon after, their ship reached the shores of Velankanni, India. So they kept their word and built this cathedral. It's a nice gesture of gratitude, but God never asked for a building. It's not as though the sailors asked God what he wanted them to do -- they were only looking at God as a means to their own safety.

How many little structures have we built for God in our minds, promises made to get him to do something for us without giving much thought to his own agenda? Am I trying to use God as just another resource to get what I want?

3. Character questions don't interest me.

Jesus asks James and John a pretty soul-searching question: “Are you able to drink the cup I'm going to drink? Do you really have the stuff it takes to get through what I'm going to face?”

That's a big question. You would think they would at least stop long enough to ask, “What are you going to face?” and “What do you think is needed to do that?”

But they are so focused on what they want that they don't have time for those kinds of issues. “Of course we're up for it! When do we start?” What matters is securing the prize and sealing the deal. Thoughts about personal integrity and identity take a back seat when we're pursuing power.

4. My relationships are being affected.

As soon as the other disciples catch wind of what James and John were up to, they get furious. Why? Because now instead of all playing on the same team, James and John are playing for themselves. They did something without telling the group what they were doing, which broke trust. They were putting themselves at the front of the line, showing they thought they were more important than everybody else.

What's more, their actions drew out the worst in the other disciples. Now everybody was feeling insecure and competitive and frustrated, thinking about their own way to gain some power or defend their territory.

All those same dynamics come into play when we're power hungry. We secretly work toward our own agendas and break the trust of those we're closest to. We look for ways to make ourselves look good, and it ends up being at the expense of other people. And as we do that, we start to see them responding to us in kind, getting defensive, fighting back and trying to one-up us the way we one-upped them.

Those are some of the surface signs that show up when we're running after influence, but they're really just that – signs. They are symptoms of a deeper problem, which is a flawed view of where we fit in the world – both in relationship to other people and in relationship to God. It's that old-fashioned problem of pride.

Romans 12:16

Do not be conceited.

The word translated to English as conceited is very picturesque in the Greek, because it's the compound word “empty glory.” It's like going to the store and buying a really

colorful paper mache piñata. You take it home, hang it up for the party, thinking it came with candy inside. But really, it's just a hollow shell, which you discover too late when somebody cracks it open.. When we pursue our own glory, it looks really great at first, but you soon discover it's just a hollow shell.

Did you hear any of the buzz a few weeks ago about the competition between the actor Ashton Kutcher and CNN to see who would be the first to reach 1 million people on Twitter? In case you don't know, Twitter is a way to send short, mass broadcast messages to people's phones or computers in these short bursts called Tweets. This contest was portrayed as being a real statement that even one person could have as much power as a media organization to reach a large audience.

But everybody except Ashton and CNN was going, "Who cares?" A celebrity sending out personal updates on Twitter is hardly the definition of power. It's hard to even think of Tweet and powerful as words that would fit in the same sentence. There was a disconnect that made the average American see through the whole thing as a silly publicity stunt.

I think God must see our pursuit of power in a similar light. We take it so seriously as we try to get ahead, Like the client I had who would always took credit for our work to try and score points with her boss, going to ridiculous lengths to hide our involvement. Or the husband who refuses to go to counseling because his wife wants to go, and going would mean giving up power in the relationship. God looks at this kind of stuff and says "these are all just Tweets and Twitters."

They're empty glory. And as we chase what's hollow, we've abandoned the search for something more substantial. The Bible says the whole earth is FULL of the Lord's glory. It's filled up with it. It's poured to the top and running over with it. That's the kind of glory that will truly satisfy us, because that's what we were designed to pursue. We were built to bring honor and glory and praise to God. We were created to live in a way that reflects well on him. And when we're engaged in that, we'll find that we feel fulfilled and empowered and energized in a way that can't compare to how we feel when we're pursuing our own glory.

The methods for doing that, though, are completely opposite of what we would think. Christ tells his followers they have to approach life with a totally different mindset than the rest of the world. Look again at his words:

You know that the 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 your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

You would think for as long as those words have been in print they would be less shocking to us by now. But they are still as radical, still as explosive and unexpected as

ever. This is humility in the extreme, and it is just not how we see things getting done in the world.

In this particular instance, we are called to be a contrast with the way of the world, to show a better way. And ironically, the less we focus on making something of ourselves, the freer we are to become what God made us to be.

Jesus talks about the Gentiles getting focused on their own authority and exercising it over each other. That's how the system works – you achieve power and then use it. But, when your goal is getting to a point where you can exert influence over other people, it brings with it an enormous burden. Your whole life revolves around getting power, trying to keep it once you have it, and using it to your full advantage. That's a tremendous amount of energy spent maintaining your position.

But think for a minute if you didn't really care about influence. Imagine not worrying about what other people think of you. Imagine not stressing over how to make your life better. Imagine not losing sleep over how you can control the situation you're in. What would life look like without those things consuming us? I think it would look like freedom. You could live your life doing what you thought was right rather than what you thought would give you an advantage.

And I think that's what Christ is saying. When we remove the burden of trying to lift ourselves up over other people and instead let gravity take us all the way to the bottom of the pile, we can instead just be who we were meant to be. If we take self-promotion out of the equation, here's what we find:

1. We can focus on the will of God

Remember how we said the pursuit of power makes God a means to an end? Our self-centered plans leave little room for God's agenda. As Paul wrote to the Philippians,

Philippians 2:21

Most people around here are looking out for themselves, with little concern for the things of Jesus.

But when we let go of our own advancement, we find we have energy to think about what matters to Christ. I love how he doesn't throw out the desire for greatness entirely – he just redirects it. He says, "You want to be great? Take all that ambition and pour it into really being a good servant."

James and John were ambitious guys, and that was not a bad thing. It just needed to be channeled to a more selfless end. And that's exactly what happened. Aunt Sal was one of the selfless women who volunteered to go back to the dead body of Jesus with the spices to prep it for burial. And God gave her the privilege of being one of the first witnesses to the resurrection.. James became the first apostle to be martyred for the faith, which in turn became a pivotal moment for giving the church greater courage. John went

on to guide and nurture the church, and it was while being exiled to an island for his faith that Christ gave him the great vision that became the book of Revelation, which was a huge encouragement to other Christians being persecuted.

All three learned to humble themselves before God. God used the lowest, least likely moments in their lives to have the biggest impact. Their greatness came from their humility.

2. We can see the needs of others

It's not just our relationship to God that changes when we humble ourselves. To be a servant assumes there's someone to serve. And it means instead of thinking about how we can use the other person to get what we want, we take a genuine interest in helping meet their needs.

Valentine Crespo is the Master Butler at Caesar's hotel in Las Vegas. He gives the high rollers and celebrities the star treatment when they come to town. He says the key to being a great butler is knowing and anticipating a guest's needs. He'll research as much about them as possible before they even check in – all about their likes and dislikes as well as any special needs. Then he'll take care of everything he can to make their experience great. He says, "There's great enjoyment in bringing a smile to someone who has just lost 5 million dollars."

What if we were to take that kind of interest in each other, starting with our own families? Jordy and Sarah McCall took part in a marriage class at another church a few years ago. And Jordy said that one line the instructor shared with the group had really hit home for him, and that was this: Guys, you need to become master students of your wives. In other words, work at being really good at knowing her, because if you do that, you'll be so focused on her needs instead of your own that serving her will be easy.

That's an awesome perspective for all of us. Become master students of each other. Make it your goal to learn what the core people in your life need most. I say core people, because it would be easy to let our people-pleasing side kick in and use the idea of knowing people really well as one more tool for making ourselves look good.

Philippians 2:4

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

One final benefit of learning to be a servant is that

3. We can know ourselves

Whereas character questions are sidelined when we are grabbing for power, they move back into view when we're not preoccupied any more. When all the stuff and the dreams and the status that gave us our identity are stripped away, we have to take a good hard look at ourselves.

Sheila Walsh was a successful Christian singer and TV personality, hosting a TV show and on top of her game as far as outward appearances looked. But inside she was falling apart, and finally in 1992, she couldn't take it anymore. Here's how she tells it:

One morning I was sitting on national television with my nice suit and inflatable hairdo and that night I was in the locked ward of a psychiatric hospital. It was the kindest thing God could have done to me.

The very first day in the hospital, the psychiatrist asked me, "Who are you?"

"I'm the co-host of the 700 Club."

That's not what I meant," he said.

"Well, I'm a writer. I'm a singer."

"That's not what I meant. Who are you?"

"I don't have a clue," I said.

And he replied, "Now that's right and that's why you're here."

I measured myself by what other people thought of me. That was slowly killing me. Before I entered the hospital, some of the 700 Club staff said to me, "Don't do this. You will never regain any kind of platform. If people know you were in a mental institution and on medication, it's over."

I said, "You know what? It's over anyway. So I can't think about that."

I really thought I had lost everything. My house. My salary. My job. Everything. But I found my life. I discovered at the lowest moment of my life that everything that was true about me, God knew.

Do you need to hear that today? You may have walked in here today with big secrets you are working hard to manage – to keep in the dark. But God knows everything that's true about you. And he loves you and he wants you to be whole. When did Sheila Walsh find freedom? Not on the 700 club or living a successful life. It was when she humbled herself and told the truth.

When we stop pretending to be somebody else, when we quit trying to be more special or influential or attractive or rich anything else we've attached our security to, that's when we can begin to know our true selves, because our identity is no longer wrapped up in all the "empty glory" we were pursuing.

You have to be able to have a strong sense of identity to do what Christ is asking, because he says we should take on the role of a slave. Being a slave means doing forced labor. It isn't something you normally have a choice about.

So Jesus is asking for us to voluntarily think of ourselves in what is normally an involuntary role. It's the ultimate humiliation – giving up your rights to another.

There was actually a provision for this in the Israelite slave system. If a Hebrew happened to own another Hebrew as a slave, the law required them to set that person free after six years of service. But the slave had a choice – he didn't have to go free. He could keep serving.

Exodus 21:5-6

"But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.

I think it's remarkable that the motivation cited for this kind of volunteer service was love – love for their master and their family. Their being pierced was a permanent reminder of their love. And I think love is the only reason any of us would ever volunteer to be humbled in the way we're talking about. Loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves are the only motivations deep enough.

And what generates that kind of love? Knowing how much God first loved us.

Because Christ volunteered for the ultimate humiliation. The one who said "I am the Life" willingly went to his death on a cross. He didn't have to. And he said, "I love my Father and I love the world, and I do not want to go free." And so he was pierced as a sign of that love.

Christ is our true motivation. Every time we start to feel like we want to complain about not being able to get our own way or having to play the servant role, all we have to do is think of Jesus. If anybody deserved better treatment it was him. If anybody could have sought power and influence, it was him. Instead he gave it all up.

In a moment, we'll gather around the Lord's Table once again to remember all he did for us. Many church traditions call it the Eucharist, which in Latin means thankful. I like that. And as we share the thankfulness meal together this morning, I hope gratitude is what grips us. Because it's hard to be prideful and thankful at the same time. Dr. Mike Wilkins says this:

That is what lies behind the concept of the Christian life as being able to be generous and to give all day and every day as a pattern of life. The giving of ourselves – including our careers, our relationships, our talents, our resources and our time – flows from a transformation of our lives produced by God's giving to us. The motivation for devoting ourselves to service comes simply from a grateful heart.

What are you striving for this morning? Christ has so much more to offer than the hollow promises of personal gain. Take a moment alone with him this morning to lay it down. And take a moment to thank him for what he did for us by becoming a servant and giving his life as a ransom for many.