

## **Prudent Love**

Mark 10:35-52

When I was a kid, one of my favorite Christmas traditions was seeing Santa Claus down on the town center (or as we called it, the “square”) of the town I grew up in. There used to be some sort of trolley, decorated for Christmas, that served as Santa’s sleigh. And you could take a ride with Santa around the square; it was super cool. Little did I know at the time that *that* particular Santa was my parent’s friend, Steve, and that he was part of a widespread conspiracy to coordinate my requests with what I actually received under the tree. All I knew at the time was that this was pretty cool. And of course the highlight was being able to get a face-to-face with Santa. It’s the same thing countless families do today at the mall or wherever. And after you finish standing in line, if you survive the obligatory photo op that reduces thousands of children to tears each year, Santa finally asks you the question you’ve been dying to answer: “So what do you want for Christmas?” It’s like this glorious blank check: what do you want for Christmas? The only problem in answering it was limiting our imagination or greed.

And while some of us might look askance at such a tradition or such a question, what if we changed the scenario just a bit? What if Jesus asked you a similar question: “What do you want me to do for you?” What do you want me to do for you? What would you say?

This is the very question he asks two different people, in two back-to-back stories in our passage this morning. And what’s interesting is that while both parties ask Jesus for something because they recognize that he is the true king of Israel, the one they’ve all been waiting for (the first refers to when he “sits” in his “glory”—that’s throne language, v. 36; and the second calls him the “Son of David,” a royal title, vv. 47-48), only one of them receives a favorable answer to their request. Jesus says Yes to one and No to the other. But what we’re going to see this morning is that both Jesus’ Yes *and* his No come from a heart of love. Jesus loves us with a *prudent love*—he knows how to distinguish between what we want and what’s truly best for us.

We’ve spent our fall meditating on the heart of Jesus as it’s revealed in the Gospels, particularly in how Jesus treats other people—what his interactions reveal to us about his love—both how he loves us, and how we ought to love others. Today we return to Mark ch. 10, where we have two relatively well known stories—the request of James and John to sit at Jesus’ right and left hand (10:35-45) and Jesus’ healing of blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). These stories are often looked at independent of each other, but as we’re going to see, Mark has intentionally stitched them together to create a remarkable contrast that not only exposes the hearts of the people Jesus encounters, but reveals his own heart of love. Again, a prudent love, that is sometimes tough, and sometimes tender, but always loving.

We’ll start with tough love in vv. 35-45.

## Tough Love (10:35-45)

Again, at this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem for his final week. Just prior to our passage, Jesus tells his disciples for a third time what's about to happen: his condemnation, crucifixion, and resurrection from the dead (10:32-34). This is what his kingdom is ultimately about. This is what it will cost to establish his kingdom and claim his throne—taking our place in love: bearing the full weight of his Father's holy anger against all human sin and rebellion by dying on the cross, and then conquering death to bring new life and new creation through his resurrection.

But despite this warning about what's to come, his disciples—two in particular—have something entirely different on their mind. Verse 35: “And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’”

Now, just by the way that they phrase that question, you know this is not going to be good. Whenever my kids want something or want me to do something for them, but know the answer is going to be No, they try to get me to promise to say Yes before they even tell me what they want. *Classic tactic.* (And I hate to burst your bubbles, kids, but it doesn't work. We know what you're doing.)

But, funny enough, Jesus plays along: “And he said to them,” v. 36, “‘What do you want me to do for you?’” What do you want me to do for you? “And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory’” (10:37).

Jesus is talking about suffering; James and John are thinking about glory. That's what we usually think about when we think of kings and kingdoms—power, riches, fame, admiration, beauty, majesty. People bowing down, people obeying your word, enemies falling before you. And the closer you are to the king, the more power and glory you get to share. What do you want for Christmas? I want to sit next to the king.

And to be fair, it's not entirely clear whether this was their own idea or mom's idea. Matthew tells us that their mom approached Jesus with them to make this request (Matt. 20:20-21). You thought the whole “helicopter parent” thing was new. Long before moms were showing up in college professors' offices to dispute their kids' test grades, James and John's mom was *lobbying Jesus* for the seating arrangement in the kingdom.

And it's funny the way they execute their plan. It's like they came up with this great idea, and they want to get to Jesus and ask him for it before anyone else thinks of it. Just as funny is when the other disciples find out. Verse 41 tells us, “And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.” When they hear what James and John asked Jesus, they got mad. Probably not because they thought it was inappropriate, but because they hadn't thought of it first. All the disciples seem focused on glory (cf. 10:42-45).

So what will Jesus say? What does Jesus' love look like in the face of such a request? Verse 38:

Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the

baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” (10:38-40)

Sometimes love means saying No. The disciples ask for glory, and Jesus gently but firmly says no.

And part of that is because the disciples don’t really know what they’re asking for. Jesus speaks of his mission in terms of drinking “the cup.” Throughout the Old Testament, the cup was a frequent picture of God’s wrath against sin and rebellion (cf. Ps. 75:8; Isa 51:17; Jer 51:7; et al.). Think about what he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. *Remove this cup from me.*” (Mk. 14:36). The cup he’s talking about is the cup of God’s wrath—the full weight of God’s holy anger against wickedness, rebellion, and sin. The cup that God’s enemies deserved, poured out on his own Son instead. A cup that Jesus is about to *willingly* drain to the dregs. “Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

James and John fail to realize what it will cost Jesus to receive his glory, that there is a cross before the crown. As Matthew Henry once said, “We know not what we ask, when we ask for the glory of wearing the crown, and ask not for grace to bear the cross in our way to it.”<sup>1</sup> They hear Jesus talk about a cup, and “they think it is the golden goblet of glory and power.”<sup>2</sup> We can drink that. Cheers! But though they don’t yet have ears to hear it, Jesus affirms that they will drink his cup of suffering. In Acts 12, James is the first among the apostles to die for his faith (Acts 12:2). John ends his days in isolation and exile on the island of Patmos because of his witness to Christ (Rev. 1:9). They will drink his cup, and be baptized with his baptism—death. And yet, “to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” Jesus’ answer is No. They will share in his cross, but that particular crown is for the Father to decide.

Our temptation today is to think that loving someone means giving them whatever they want. And being loved means no one ever tells you No. But parents of young children know instinctively that this is a lie. How often does a toddler want something that will actually harm them? Grabbing for sharp knives or running into the street or trying to put their head in an oven. And while your child may kick and scream and call you a tyrant for telling them No, you’re doing it out of love. In fact, to say Yes would have been *unloving*.

And yet, even that seemingly clear-headed logic is being challenged today in our age of what’s called “expressive individualism.” The idea that anyone would say No to anything someone wants, or wants to be or to do, is seen not just as unloving, but hateful. Violent. Toxic. So what do we mean by “expressive individualism”? As Tim Keller defines it, it’s the belief that “identity comes through self-expression, through discovering one’s most authentic desires and being free to be one’s authentic self.”<sup>3</sup> So, you think of the slogans that drive pop culture today:

- *You be you.*
- *Be true to yourself.*
- *Follow your heart.*

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, as cited in D.A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 431.

<sup>2</sup> Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 740.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Keller, as cited in Jaquelle Crowe, “[How Youth Like Me Learn Expressive Individualism](#),” *The Gospel Coalition*, Jan. 4, 2017.

- *Find yourself.*<sup>4</sup>

Trevin Wax (who spoke at our Life on Mission conference a couple years ago) explains further:

The key here is that the purpose of life is to find one's deepest self and then express that to the world, forging that identity in ways that counter whatever family, friends, political affiliations, previous generations, or religious authorities might say. (Many a Disney movie has followed a narrative plot line of someone finding and forging one's self-identity in opposition to the naysayers.)

And if that's how we define our purpose in life, then as sociologist Yuval Levin explains, "The capacity of individuals to define the terms of their own existence by defining their personal identities is increasingly equated with liberty and with the meaning of some of our basic rights."<sup>5</sup> It's the new secular orthodoxy. Freedom means being able to do what I want to do, and be who I want to be. Put that in religious categories, and Wax explains:

If the first and greatest commandment is to "be yourself," then the unforgivable sin is to be false or to wilt before some external benchmark that others (like the church) might foist upon you. Sin is the failure to be true to yourself. Thus, the solution is not repentance, but reassertion. It's to reestablish your claim to ultimate sovereignty over your life and to courageously resist the outside forces that would call you to any kind of "conformity."<sup>6</sup>

What all of this means is that if we define "love" in the categories of expressive individualism, then unless you meet someone with unqualified acceptance of who they feel they are, and withhold nothing from them that they believe helps them express their true self, then you don't even know what love is. If you love someone, you want whatever they want, and give them whatever they want. We feel unloving toward others unless our answer to them is always "yes." And we feel unloved by God when he answers our prayers "no."

But what if—just *what if*—someone doesn't know what they are actually asking for? What if giving them what they want would actually harm them? What if we admitted what the parent of young children instinctively knows (what all of us instinctively know): that not everything we want is actually good for us? That sometimes love means saying No?

What if Jesus had answered Yes? What if he had given them what they asked for? He would have actually harmed them in two ways. First, because allowing them to sit on his right and his left in his glory would have gotten them killed, very quickly. Think about where Jesus was enthroned when he officially established his kingdom. Not in a palace, but on a cross. And there were two people, one on his right and one on his left, when he took that "seat." And I'm pretty sure James and John were thankful it wasn't them.

Second, to say Yes to their quest for glory would have perpetuated a false view of greatness and a false understanding of God's kingdom. And this was something all of the disciples had to be sorted out on. Look at v. 42:

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<sup>4</sup> Trevin Wax, "[Expressive Individualism: What Is It?](#)" *The Gospel Coalition*, Oct. 18, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, as cited in Wax, "Expressive Individualism: What Is It?"

<sup>6</sup> Trevin Wax, "[What Expressive Individualism Does to Sin](#)," *The Gospel Coalition*, Nov. 13, 2018.

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (10:42-45)

Following Jesus is not about attaining power and glory for ourselves, but reflecting his glory through sacrificial service. The problem here is not merely having authority or power; Jesus has promised his apostles a certain level of authority; in Matthew 19 he says they will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). The problem is *lusting* for authority and power, that we might use it for personal advantage—to “lord it over” someone. Longing for it, such that knowing Jesus simply becomes a means to the end of our own self-glorification. Finding my true self and expressing it.

We want to be served. We want to be made much of. We expect that if we follow Jesus, things should go well for us. Our lives should be happy and fulfilled. Everyone will approve of us. Friends won’t hurt us. Our careers will prosper. Our kids will be successful and well-adjusted. And if that doesn’t happen, we don’t feel loved. We’re more interested in being treated like we’re first than serving like we’re last.

But following Jesus is not about attaining power and glory for ourselves, but reflecting his glory through sacrificial service. As we saw last week, and again this week, the last will be first. “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” That means that life is no longer about defining the terms of my own existence and asserting my identity through self-expression, wringing my hands over whether others will agree with or affirm that. Rather, surrendering the terms of my existence to Christ who made me and loves me and gave himself up for me, reestablishes my identity in him, which frees me to enter into relationships not asking, ‘what’s in it for me?’ ‘what will you do for me?’, but how can I love you? How can I show the love of Jesus? How can I love and serve this person in such a way that they see and savor God’s love for them in Christ?

How freeing would that be? To no longer be enslaved to the insecurity of finding myself or asserting myself or making sure I’m getting the acceptance and glory due my name, and instead gladly and lovingly lay my life down for others, no strings attached. Simply because I love them and Christ loves them even as he has loved me.

Jesus loves us with a prudent love. He knows how to distinguish between what we want and what’s truly best for us. Which means that sometimes, love means saying No.

But sometimes, it means saying Yes. And that’s what we see in the second story (more briefly now)—tender love.

### **Tender Love (10:46-52)**

Verse 46:

And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And

when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (10:46-47)

Once again, someone approaches Jesus, recognizing his identity and authority as King, and asking him to do something. And it's quite a contrast to the previous scene. Where James and John's helicopter mom practically arranged the conversation and advocated for them, the crowds around Bartimaeus are trying to shut him up. "And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent" (v. 48). He's not worth Jesus' time, just like those pesky kids earlier in the chapter that we mentioned briefly last week (cf. 10:13-16). But in Jesus' kingdom, the last will be first. So when he cries "out all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'" Jesus calls him. And when he comes to him, Jesus says to him, "'What do you want me to do for you?' And the blind man said to him, 'Rabbi, let me recover my sight.' And Jesus said to him, 'Go your way; your faith has made you well.' And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way" (10:51-52). Sometimes love means saying Yes.

It really is a contrast from the previous story. And when you read them in contrast, you realize who is truly blind, and who is able to see King Jesus for who he is and what he's come to do.

The disciples asked for glory; the blind man asks for mercy. The disciples sought to leverage their position with Jesus; the blind man doesn't have a position. In fact, he has nothing to leverage, nothing to bargain with. He is utterly and totally dependent on the mercy of others. He is, in the fullest sense of the word, humble. But he knows his need, and he believes that Jesus alone can heal it.

And that's what Jesus recognizes—"your *faith* has made you well." Unlike with the disciples, where saying Yes would have distorted his kingdom, here, saying Yes actually reveals God's kingdom—it reveals Jesus' love, his authority, his plan to make all things new. It brings real help to the man—it delivers him from a crippling trial and makes him whole again. It brings help and healing that accords with God's vision for his kingdom, where "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped" (Isa. 35:5). And it affirms the faith in the man's heart and his handle on who Jesus is. For the man, love meant being tender, compassionate, merciful. Love meant saying Yes.

Now that doesn't mean that whenever our heart is good and our faith is real that Jesus will always say yes. It's not a formula to manipulate Jesus. Rather, it's an invitation to trust his prudent love. That he knows what he's doing, and that his answer—even if it surprises us, even if it doesn't make sense, even if it feels unloving in the moment—is always fueled by his matchless love, and grounded in not merely in what we want, but in what's truly best for us.

If we stop and think about it, and reflect on a single day in our lives, we can see Jesus' Yes to us everywhere. Every friendship we have is an expression of his love for us. Every good thing we enjoy, everything in our life that makes us stronger. Every kindness we receive. Every breath we take is a Yes from the mouth of Jesus. He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (cf. Exod. 34:6-7).

That doesn't mean there aren't still hard things. Acknowledging the multitude of Christ's Yeses to us doesn't mean there aren't still a lot of Nos. Some of which hurt. But every single Yes and

No flows from his prudent love. And when we're tempted to doubt that—when his Yes feels late, or his No feels unloving—we need only remember the cross—his ultimate and most costly Yes. If God can bring something so good, so loving, so life giving as salvation and eternal redemption out of something so ugly, so difficult, so evil as the crucifixion of the world's Savior, then whatever his answer to us, we know it is part of his plan to work all things for our good and his glory. A glory revealed in his first advent through the cross; a glory that will culminate in his second advent with a crown.

Jesus loves us with a prudent love. Receiving that love requires faith—trusting that he knows what he's doing, even when we don't, and that he's doing it out of love. It requires faith and patience.

And reflecting that love requires wisdom. When should our love be tough? When should it be tender? We need wisdom to know how to love others well—wisdom that keeps our love grounded in truth, and wrapped in mercy. So what does that look like practically speaking?

One example: for Carissa and me as parents, it means that we try to say Yes to everything we can say Yes to with our kids. We don't want them to experience Christianity of a religion of No. But it also means that when we say No, they know there's a reason. Even if it doesn't make sense to them. And the guideline, the guardrails that direct our steps—of when to say Yes and No—are the truth of the gospel. Sin really is sinful, because God is holy, and grace really is sufficient, because the blood of Jesus is enough. When I need wisdom to love my kids well, or my neighbors well, or my friends or colleagues or whomever—those are the two categories I try to operate within. The sinfulness of sin and the sufficiency of grace. If I lose sight of either of those, the relationship ends up in the ditch.

What happens when you run a hard line on sin and there's no grace? You wind up with a relationship marked by self-righteous legalism that generates either pride (if they're good at performing) or shame and despair (if they're not). What happens when you run a hard line on grace, but there's no clarity on sin? You wind up with lives marked by self-destructive indulgence that produces either enslavement or cynicism.

Prudent love follows the guardrails of the gospel so that like Jesus, we might be able to distinguish between what someone wants, and what's truly best for them. So that whether we say Yes or No, we answer from a love that is grounded in truth and wrapped in mercy, to the glory of God and the good of others.