

Christ as Servant, as presented in Mark's Gospel.

Mark writes his gospel to show our Lord Jesus Christ bringing the Kingdom of God into human history, 1:15. To be involved in this kingdom human beings have to cooperate with God in two ways:

1. We must “repent” – be turned inside out and downside up by crowning Jesus as our king, giving Him free rule in our lives.
2. We must “believe the good news” – commit ourselves to living as God’s radical disciples, following Jesus whatever the cost to ourselves. We do this knowing He first served us by giving His life for us, 10:45.

People have responded to Jesus ever since He lived on this earth. Some men and women deliberately live to serve under the sovereign rule of God. Others live by their own rules, and go their individually chosen way.

The kingdom Jesus started is present throughout our world. Jesus’ kingdom is growing, although it has no physical place on earth of its own. It needs no earthly passports or border controls. Those inside Jesus’ kingdom live with recognised accountability to Jesus. This means we have accepted God-given parameters and values. God rules our hearts and minds. We show this by becoming more and more like Jesus Christ in our daily lives. Jesus is “the image of invisible God”, Colossians 1:15; 2:9-10. Because our minds are converted into what I will call *kingdom minds*, we always think to please our God who made us. We try to become all He intends us to be.

Jesus calls and we follow Him, just as the disciples who lived with Jesus on earth, Mark 1:17-20. Jesus Himself lived *to serve and to give*, Mark 10:45. In Christ’s kingdom today’s Christian disciples continually surrender themselves to their Master.

At first sight it seems rather strange that King Jesus should describe His own purpose as being in the role and position of a servant. Why not the role of a monarch, a ruler or a leader? Mark 10:45 is seen by many as the key verse in this gospel. “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” (N.I.V). As in all Bible study this verse must be understood in context with the surrounding verses and with the general thrust of the whole book. Only when we correctly understand it can we successfully apply it to our daily lives.

First a definition. A *servant* is “a person employed to work for another, especially one who performs household duties”.¹ A servant is “someone whose job is to cook, clean, or do other work in someone else’s home”.² In Africa and elsewhere today examples of servants include houseboys, cleaning maids, gate guards, car drivers, gofers, etc. The words “servant” and “to serve” in Mark 10:43 and 45 come from the same Greek word that gives us church *deacons*. It means a person who ministers, who is an attendant, serving as a virtual slave. It means one who simply does what he or she is told to do. One who serves submissively before the acknowledged Master. Such servants are the real leaders of the Church. This is how Jesus described His own mission.

Reading Mark we can learn several aspects about Jesus Christ as Servant. Since we claim to be followers of the Lord Jesus, these qualities should be evident in our own *servant service*.

1. Jesus chose a fixed course for His own life

Jesus decided He would be a servant. He chose to be a servant. In fact, He is *the* servant of the Old Testament Isaiah prophecies, Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 12:17-21; Isaiah 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12; Mark 9:31-32.

Immediately before saying the words of our text, Mark 10:45, Jesus had spoken for the third time about going to the cross, Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34. Our text says: He came “to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”, 10:45. Jesus knew where His life was heading. He knew what would keep on pleasing His Father, 1:10-11. He must keep on serving and keep on giving. Jesus did not live to please Himself. He lived – and was to die – to please His Father in heaven. The servant serves the Master one hundred percent.

¹ English dictionary (Glasgow: Harper Collins) 1995.

² Macmillan School Dictionary, (Oxford: Macmillan) 2004.

I used to go bird watching in Khartoum with a small group from our church. Two Sudanese boatmen would row us to Crocodile Island in the Blue Nile. The strong flow of the river dragged the boat down river, away from the island. Aware this would happen, the wise boatmen set a course which headed well up river on the island shore. Once we'd landed and disembarked, they carefully pulled the boat against the current up towards the top of the island. They were then ready for the journey back in three or four hours' time.

Setting the course of your life, factoring in the conditions you face, is a mark of good servanthood.

2. Jesus willingly paid the full cost of doing God's will

The word "ransom" in Mark 10:45 was regularly used in Jesus' time for the money paid to free a slave or a prisoner. The tradition of family and friends having to collect together and pay "blood money" for the release of male or female prisoners from Kober or Omdurman prisons in Sudan, after they have served their full sentence, is similar.

Jesus knew He was going to pay a high price to complete the Father's will for His life. "Suffer", "be rejected", "be killed", "be betrayed", *be mocked, be spat on, be flogged*, are some of the anticipated payments Jesus warned the disciples He would be asked to make, Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34. Serving us cost Jesus.

In Mark 8:34 Jesus told the disciples and the larger crowd: "... if anyone would come after me, he *must* deny himself and take up his cross and follow me," (*italics mine*). "Must" means it is compulsory. An obligation. This is necessary for all men and women who would properly serve the servant Jesus.

In Gethsemane before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus thought about His cross. He was "deeply distressed", "troubled", and "overwhelmed with sorrow", Mark 14:33,34. Yet the intensity of His determination to serve in whatever way was necessary overcame the

temptation to opt out, verse 36. Jesus said to His Father, “Yet not what I will, but what you will”.

The earthly end of Jesus provides a stiff challenge for any who would be disciples today. “Not only must He (Jesus) go the way of death, so too must anyone who would be a disciple of his”.³ Twenty-first century servants of God must choose the right way, not the easy way.

3. Jesus turned the traditionally accepted norms upside down

“The servant Jesus is an example of how to walk with God in a world that rejects those sent by God”.⁴ John the Baptist and Jesus were both rejected by the influential leaders of their day. John served successfully in all God called him to do, but he was neither released from prison nor saved from execution, Mark 1:4-8; 6:16-29. One commentator calls John “the prototype of Jesus”.⁵ *In the eyes of the world John may have failed, but in the eyes of his Master he did very well indeed.* A Christian servant is ready to suffer as part of his or her calling to follow Jesus.

Jesus said fishing for men is sometimes more important than fishing for fish, Mark 1:17,18. Jesus’ servants do not live dominated by material things. Their priority is always to do the will of God. We may have less of this world’s material possessions, but we live for far more than that! In this life, a crown of thorns may prove to be of more value than a crown of gold! Everything we do should serve our ultimate purpose.

Jesus did not seek maximum publicity or popularity from every good thing He did, Mark 1:34; 1:37,38; 1:44; 3:7; 3:12; 5:18-19; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26; 8:30; etc. He often required silence from people. He knew that merely responding to a miracle was an inadequate basis for servant discipleship. Jesus still looks for *true* faith today. Response to a miracle, response to religious upbringing, response to education, response to family background, or response to demonic

³ Donald English, The Message of Mark, Bible Speaks Today, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1992.

⁴ Darrell Bock, The Gospel of Mark, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House) 2005, p.398.

⁵ Ralph P. Martin, Mark: Evangelist and Theologian, (Oxford: Paternoster Press) 1972.

testimony (even though true) does not guarantee servant discipleship. Recognising who Jesus is, taking up the offered cross, and following Jesus' way, is still His method.

Jesus said the message of His kingdom was for bad people not good people, Mark 2:17. This verse is another purpose statement of Jesus. Think about it along with 10:45 and notice Jesus came to seek, to serve and to save sinners!

Jesus said a Christian's closest family are fellow-disciples, not necessarily blood relatives, Mark 3:33, 34. I see nepotism in James and John's desire to sit beside Jesus in glory, 10:35-37. It is probably in the other disciples' jealous response as well, 10:41. A servant disciple will always put obedience to Jesus before obedience to the demands of his own biological family.

Jesus said that national traditions had taken the place of God's word, and this was wrong, Mark 7:9-13. It is too easy to serve expected custom instead of serving Jesus. Appointment by a religious system does not automatically give real Christian authority. Outward words and works of worship don't always signify correctness of heart attitude. Genuine authority is always recognisable in those who intimately follow Jesus. Jesus did what His Father expected of Him, not necessarily what other people expected. Servant service frequently speaks with an eloquent silence.

Jesus said that to lose your life in gospel service is the best investment you can ever make, Mark 8:35. The entire world is of less value to you than your own soul, 8:36-37. Self-sacrificing service is the rule of thumb for the Christian. Good servants have their Master's values – and they live by them! To be a servant disciple probably means being quite different from most other people around you.

Jesus said that the best people in His kingdom were those who didn't mind being last, not those who were always jostling to be first, Mark 9:35. This must have embarrassed the disciples because of their earlier arguments, verse 34. Those who would be true servants

must also avoid elitism themselves, 9:38-40. It is so easy to be proud of your humble position!

We are not the only servants of God!

And finally, Jesus said that to lead is to serve, Mark 10:42-45. The same John who argued along the road behind Jesus, “who was the greatest?”, 9:34, and who asked if he “could sit at (Jesus’) right or left hand in glory?”, 10:37, was the one who later wrote: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers”, 1 John 3:16 (italics mine). That disciple learned how to lead by serving. He did this as he watched Jesus arrested, executed, and later raised again by God. God taught him a life-changing lesson.

A prayer to use:

“God, I am truly sorry that even as a Christian I don’t always live as you would have me live. Help me simply to do what a kingdom servant should. May I be completely what you want me to be. Please can I give everything that you want me to give. Let it be obvious to everyone around me that I live only to serve the King of Kings. May I bring Jesus to people through my service today and for as long as I can be useful to you.

For the glory of my Lord Jesus, I pray this in His name, Amen.”

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Describe what it means for a person to live *in the kingdom of God in Sudan* today.

Mark 1:15.

What do you believe a “kingdom mind” is?

2. “Servants are the real leaders of the church”. Discuss *how* and *why* this is true.

Consider Jesus’ Himself in Mark 10:45. Consider His words from Matthew 20:20-28.

What were the people of God originally told? Deuteronomy 10:12-13.

3. When should a Christian “servant” stop serving? Give examples from Scripture, including from the life and death of Jesus.

4. Explain why “a crown of thorns may prove to be of more value than a crown of gold”.

5. If people show sinful attitudes etc. should we still serve them?

Give reasons for your answer from Scripture and from life.

6. List some customs and traditions – in church and in society – that you think hinder

Christians from being servants.

What can be done to encourage Christian serving despite these circumstances?

7. Put into your own words the saying of Jesus, “whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it”, Mark 8:34-38.

Explain how do you think this brings out Jesus’ meaning.