

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & Status"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 10:35-45
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 30, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Tonight at the Interfaith Concert at the Mormon Tabernacle, I will sit up in the front. Insiders at the Tabernacle call that area "the stand." The organizers of the interfaith concert want clergy and other faith leaders to be visible at the start of the concert and when the official pictures are being taken.

Besides religious leaders, there will probably be some community leaders up there also. Last year, the mayor of Ogden was there, and I sat next to the president of Weber State. I suppose that the concert organizers request the obvious presence of those dignitaries to raise the profile of the event.

In some ways, that kind of attention to status feels weird to me—like, isn't an interfaith concert about the musicians? What does it really have to do with politicians and even clergy, for that matter? But I also know that we human beings are often motivated by status. Knowing and being seen with people in high places is often useful. Relationships create access and offer opportunities to increase privilege and power. Too much power can be a bad thing in the wrong hands, but a certain amount of status can also be essential to accomplish good things.

In this back-to-school season, we've been studying "Jesus 101." As we've worked our way through the early chapters of Mark, we've learned about Jesus & the Gospel, Jesus & Healing, Jesus & the Law, Jesus & Vocation, Jesus & Teaching, Jesus & Water, and Jesus & the Multitudes. If you've missed any of those sermons and want to catch up, you can always read them on our website. Look under the "Worship" tab, and you'll find my recent sermons in print. Next Sunday, we're going to move into an October baseball-themed series to help us with our stewardship drive, and I encourage you all to wear baseball shirts and caps and help us decorate the sanctuary with baseball gear. But, today, in the final sermon in this Jesus 101 series, I invite you to join me in an examination of "Jesus & Status."

1—JAMES & JOHN WANT STATUS

In Mark 10:35-45, we see right away that the disciples James and John wanted Jesus to provide them with status. Their presumption of privilege and entitlement is so strong that it's surprising to us. It's possible that some nuance and inflection is lost in the translation from the originally-spoken Aramaic to the then-written New Testament Greek to our now 21st-century American English. But the rest of the story gives credence to the fact that the Zebedee brothers didn't meekly ask Jesus for a humble favor. Instead, they essentially blurted out a statement of demand. In verse 35 they said to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And then, in verse 37, they stated that they wanted Jesus to "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Oh, boy. Those two former fishermen obviously had gotten some big ideas. And they obviously had not been paying close attention to Jesus' predictions of where he was headed. Already, three times in Mark 8, 9, and 10, Jesus had explained to his closest associates that suffering and death were coming. But the disciples probably thought those warnings about dire future events were for the "Jesus 201" series, and they didn't really need this information for the final exam in the 101 class. Introductory basics are supposed to be generally-agreed-upon, non-threatening, and happy—right? Only people majoring in a subject need to worry about conflicting and anxious details, right?

So, with their minds closed off to the extreme hardships that lay ahead, James and John could only think about Jesus miraculously healing and feeding the multitudes. Their minds were full of Jesus' popularity that caused the throngs to chase him around the Sea of Galilee, hardly giving Jesus and his disciples a moment's rest. With all that enthusiastic energy going on, surely something good was about to happen. Surely Jesus was about to be crowned king, and surely James and John could be his right and left-hand men in this glorious new kingdom.

Who could fault those ambitious fellows for asking Jesus now before those positions would inevitably be filled by someone else? Surely this kind of foresight, initiative, and determination was

admirable. Surely these were the get-up-and-go traits that would make any parent proud. The impulse and ability to take advantage of opportunities is something that is often instilled in us at a young age—either by nature or by nurture. And, of course, ambition motivated by love of God and love of neighbor can be a very powerful tool for a good life and for the positive transformation of the world. The Jesus movement then and now has needed many “can-do” persons who have a strong sense of confidence in their own abilities and rights to lead the Christian faith.

So, on one level, there probably would have been nothing wrong with James and John telling Jesus that they wanted to be his capable and competent chief executive officers. But that isn’t how their words and attitudes were perceived by Jesus or by the rest of the disciples. And, thus, Jesus had to teach them all the lesson that “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” That wasn’t true just for the *followers* of Jesus, either. Mark 10:45 tells us that Jesus, the Son of Man himself, “came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The status James and John wanted wouldn’t come by Jesus granting them some kind of cushy, privileged position in the seats to his right and left. The status James and John wanted would only come by living like Christ as a servant to those in need all around them.

2—BIBLICAL CONTEXT SHOWS IMPORTANCE OF STATUS

When we examine the bigger context leading up to this biblical story, it becomes all the more apparent that getting this status issue right is really essential for our understanding of Jesus. Last Sunday, I pointed out that the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes was so important that Mark told it two times. The same is true about this story of the disciples vying for status. This story that we’ve read from Mark 10 has a parallel in Mark 9:33-37. There, we don’t see the names of James and John, but it’s the same problem. The disciples are squabbling about who among them is the greatest. When Jesus heard what they were saying, he told them the same thing: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of

all and servant of all.” To illustrate his point, Jesus then took a little child in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” If the disciples thought Jesus was someone special, then they should realize that a lowly child has that same honor and importance.

In the very next story after that, beginning in Mark 9:38, the disciple John *is* named. He was reporting to Jesus that “we” had tried to stop someone from casting out demons in Jesus’ name. Apparently, John and one or more of the other disciples fancied themselves as the strongmen who could enforce the strict rule of Jesus on others. But Jesus told them to stop doing this, for whoever wasn’t against them was for them. Jesus even said that “whoever gives you a cup of water to drink . . . will by no means lose the reward.” In other words, while the disciples were trying to draw status lines between people to define who was in and who was out, Jesus suggested that even the simplest gesture of support should be appreciated as a contribution to Jesus’ mission and purpose.

In Mark 10, verses two through 16, Jesus talks about the status of marriage and divorce, and more about children. The purpose of these instructions is to emphasize the importance of respect and caring for those who are vulnerable. In Mark 10:17 and following, Jesus has a conversation with a rich man. Jesus tells him to sell all he owns, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. The rich man went away shocked, and the disciples were confused. If a rich man couldn’t enter the kingdom of God, then who could? Jesus’ answer, once again, was “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (10:31).

Then, in Mark 10:32-34, we see Jesus’ third foretelling of his pending arrest, suffering, and death. This business about status isn’t a minor matter to Jesus. It’s a really big deal. And, of course, that means it should matter a lot to us, who claim to be Jesus’ followers today.

CONCLUSION—GETTING STATUS RIGHT

The trick, of course, is—like I said before—that having status is often a good thing. Status and power, in and of themselves, aren’t bad. It’s how you use status that makes all the difference. And

what to do about status isn't a one-size-fits-all matter. Different people are out of balance in different ways. While Jesus was telling a rich man to give away his possessions, that very act would enrich the poor. While Jesus was lifting up a child, he was telling his disciples that they needed to become like children.

It has been the common practice of human beings who have power to teach the lowly that they should be humble and stay in their place. Women should be silent in the church. Children should respect their parents. Slaves should obey their masters. Collectively, we have a tendency to get angry or scared when someone to whom we attribute low status dares to raise their voice or defy convention and, thus, draws attention to the inequities of the system. We collectively and societally have this upset reaction because status is part of the air we breathe. Our culture is built around the sometimes-conscious, but mostly unconscious, ideas of who deserves to be treated well and who deserves to be treated poorly, who deserves to be believed and who deserves to be doubted, who deserves a second chance and who deserves to have the book thrown at them.

These collective notions of status do, sometimes, very slowly, have the possibility to shift and change. And, as Christians, we should be glad for changes that check the abuse of power. We should encourage changes that grant compassion and care to the poor, the weak, the underprivileged, the traumatized, and the lowly. We should promote changes that even out resources, opportunity, and consequences. As followers of Jesus, we should constantly be asking ourselves and others to recognize that our best status comes when we are willing to share our power and privileges with others. This is the truth of Jesus and status.