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Elis White  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Undercover Boss: Called to Lead*

Mark 10: 35-45

They say a man's home is his castle, but that doesn't always mean he gets to decorate. Am I right? The exception of course is his throne. I'm talking about the "dad chair." You know the chair I'm talking about right? When we first walked into our current apartment, which was already furnished, I immediately saw it. A brown leather recliner that made me think of sitting there drinking scotch, reading fine leather bound books and coaching Seahawks games on Sunday afternoons. Despite the fact that I don't like scotch, no one makes fine leather bound books anymore, and I don't have a clue how to coach football.<sup>1</sup>

And I know I'm not the only one with a dad chair. Our beloved Pastor Mark has an equally well appointed recliner in his living room. In fact, he writes most of his sermons there. We like to call it the holy chair—the place where the Holy Spirit is said to hover! Recently, Cyndi, his wife, and her LifeGroup moved all the living room furniture around while he was on vacation. In the process, they made it very clear whose chair it is. *[picture of the boundary line]* In fact, he has had it so long that it is beginning to show signs of wear and tear. *[picture of duck tape]* Yet, he loves it so much, he refuses to replace it! So, if anyone would like to start a "Chair Re-Upholstery Fund" on his behalf, I am sure he would be grateful!

The dad chair. Psychologist Sally Augustin says, "Generally, the Dad Chair is a protected base for the dominant male in a home."<sup>2</sup> The dad chair is the throne of the modern day home. And thrones have always been symbols of power and authority. Thrones have always been the place that leaders sit. Leaders sit in positions of power. Leaders sit on thrones. That's what many of us think. Even if today' thrones look slightly different... And that's what two of Jesus' disciples think in our Scripture passage for today. So, turn with me to Mark 10: 35 (page 855 in your pew Bibles).

*[Read Mark 10: 35-45]*

We're in the midst of a couple of months talking all about work. We've said work is good and a part of who we are. And we've defined work as 'doing something with what God gives

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<sup>1</sup> This section was inspired by Mitchell Parker's article 'The Beautiful Thing About Dad's Chair'  
<http://www.houzz.com/ideabooks/16935156/list/The-Beautiful-Thing-About-Dad-s-Chair>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.houzz.com/ideabooks/16935156/list/The-Beautiful-Thing-About-Dad-s-Chair>

you so that the world thrives and Jesus is glorified.' And this all sounds wonderfully idealistic, but the reality is, when Monday morning comes, we face real struggles, real issues. And we might have heard a great message about how God cares for our work on Sunday, but come Monday, how do we put that into practice? That's why we began a new series last week called *Undercover Boss*. We're going to spend the next few weeks talking about how we deal with the reality of work in a broken, fallen, sin-filled world. And this week, we are asking the question: How am I called to lead? And this isn't just a sermon aimed at those who are leaders in the business world. The reality is that as Christians we are all called by Jesus to lead, as we fulfill his Great Commission to make disciples.

Two of Jesus' disciples—James and John, who were in fact brothers—thought they knew what leadership looked like. I cringe at the way they come up to Jesus in our passage. Take a look at verse 35: "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." Seriously? Parents, can you imagine your kid asking you that question? "Mom, Dad, I want you to do whatever I ask." I'd be like, "Whatever you ask... Right... No way." Jesus is a bit more clever about it. Look at v. 36; he says, "What do you want me to do for you?" He's not being cornered into giving them anything. So they tell him, <sup>37</sup>"Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." They knew Jesus was a king, and they knew they were two of his top three leaders, remember Peter, James & John are Jesus' closest three disciples. So they wanted to make sure their leadership was cemented by being giving thrones on either side of Jesus' throne, (and in the process, make sure everyone knew they were more important than Peter!) You see, many of us think just like them, that leadership is about a position of power and authority, a rank, a title—a throne. But is that what leadership is all about?

I'll be honest. I have never felt less equipped to speak on any topic before. I mean, what can a 25 year-old say about leadership to a congregation full of successful leaders? So I made two decisions. One, I would let Jesus speak, and that's why I am using the Bible. Two, I would ask for help. So I chatted to some of these successful leaders from our congregation, and one of them, Steve Maxwell, who wrote our blog this week, told me: "The common perception in the workplace is that leadership is about authority and title, but it's much more than that." It's true, isn't it? There are many people who have authority and title and lead in a terrible way, in a way that does not cause the world to thrive.

I chatted with another successful business leader in our congregation who at one point in his career was brought on as president of the local branch of a national organization. About the same time, the head of the region, who would supervise him was also new in his job; this man—the regional head—was an incredibly intelligent guy, and this was the first time he had been given a position with this much power. Sadly, he thought the way to be a great leader was to suck up to the senior leaders and then tell everyone below him how it *should* be done. The reality was, he simply didn't know to deal with the power he had been given. He became hated by those who had to work from him, totally alienating himself from them, and as a result no one was willing to support him in the decisions he made. Unsurprisingly, he ended up losing his job. Sadly, he didn't seem to learn many lessons. In

his next job, in another state, he ended up breaking some state laws and this resulted in a stay in a federal prison.

You see, we so often think we need power and authority to be great leaders. Or we think if we have power and authority, then we will automatically be great leaders. But that just isn't true. And Jesus knows it isn't true in our passage. Let's see how Jesus responds to the brothers' request to sit on thrones at his right and left. Verse 38. "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" You see, Jesus is a king, and Jesus will one day sit on a throne and rule and reign over a kingdom. But he knows that the way to get there is not the way of the throne, the way of glory, no, the way to get there is the way of service, of suffering, of death, of the cross. Jesus knows that the cup he will drink is one of misery, and the baptism he will be baptized with is a baptism of fire. So he asks the brothers, "Can you do this?"

Surprisingly, they respond in verse 39 by telling him "We can." And actually, the truth is, they will, as Jesus predicts in the rest of that verse. Both suffered intense persecution for their faith, for James it resulted in being executed, for John it resulted in being exiled to the island of Patmos. But Jesus goes on to tell them, verse 40, that even though they will suffer as he suffers, "to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." And as we shall see, those places are not necessarily the places James & John are thinking of...

Of course, this causes a furor amongst the other 10 disciples. They can't believe it! Verse 41 says, "they became indignant with James and John." How dare they ask such a thing? How dare they think themselves more important than us? So Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach them what true leadership looks like. Not the way of the throne but the way of the cross. Look at verse 42. "Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as 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 slave of all."

Jesus says, "You think this is what great leadership looks like [*Point at the throne*]. Lording it over people. Exercising your authority. Well it's not. Great leadership comes in serving, in become a slave to all." What!? You can imagine the disciples thinking: what is he on? No great leader acts like a servant or a slave. They are the leaders! They're out in front. They don't wash feet and serve dinner... But Jesus redefines great leadership. He says: leadership is not the way of the throne; leadership is the way of the cross. What's interesting is, Jesus is not the only person to say this. Earlier this year, a businessman friend of mine encouraged me to watch a TED talk by an author called Simon Sinek. Sinek is not a Christian, but what he said blew me away in how close he got to quoting Jesus in this passage. Here's what he said:

"Leadership is a choice. It is not a rank. I know many people at the senior-most levels of organizations who are absolutely not leaders. They are authorities, and we do what they say because they have authority over us, but we would not follow them. And I know many people who are at the bottoms of organizations who have no authority and they are absolutely leaders, and this is because they have chosen to look after the person to the left of them, and they have chosen to look after the person to the right of them. This is what a leader is."<sup>3</sup>

You see the truth is we can all be leaders, because leadership is not about having a position of authority or power. Leadership is about serving those around you. One of the business leaders in our congregation told me: True leadership is leading where you have no authority. You see leadership is for everyone, because leadership is not about a position, leadership is about influence. And the way to be a leader is to serve. It seems somewhat counter-intuitive. Why would I serve in order to lead? Many think: "If I'm in a position of power and authority, I can just use my power to make people do things, to make them serve me, and then we will get things done." And in many ways, I am guilty of this same thinking too.

When I first came to Chapel Hill, around three years ago, I was tasked with leading a church-wide initiative in the area of evangelism and apologetics. And if I'm honest, that position, and the power and authority, as small as it was, went a little to my head. It was my first job out of college, and I entered into it with an air of confidence and a slight haughtiness. Not only this, but Pastor Mark gave me access to him that was unheard of for someone my age and in my position. Of course, it doesn't take a leadership guru to work out that I began to alienate myself from many of the people on our church staff. Truthfully, I was acting as if I could lead purely on the basis of the position given to me by Pastor Mark. Of course, with the way I was acting, I couldn't.

Thankfully, Pastor Mark, who is rarely afraid of giving me a strong steer, pulled me aside and let me know what I was blind to see with my own eyes: that I couldn't lead on the basis of my position, I had to lead on the basis of earned respect, trust and influence. And how was I to do that: love, serve and sacrifice for those around me. He told me to get to know our staff members better, ask them about their lives, care for them. He told me to jump at any opportunity I could to help someone out. He told me to leave my office door open so that people could interrupt me. He told me to smile and say hello to my colleague. He told me to do the dishes in the break room. He told me, the way to lead, is the way of service, the way of self-sacrifice, the way of the cross. And I can't stand here today and say that I have this sorted, but I know I am sorry I acted the way I did, and I am doing better. I know I love and care for our staff a lot more today than I did when I arrived. And I know that I have their respect and trust in a way that I didn't before.

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Sinek, 'Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe,'  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_why\\_good\\_leaders\\_make\\_you\\_feel\\_safe/](http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_why_good_leaders_make_you_feel_safe/)  
Sermon Notes

Great leadership is not the way of the throne, but the way of the cross. True leadership is sacrificing yourself for those around you. And the ultimate leader was Jesus. We have one final verse to read... verse 45. "For even the Son of Man [*that's the way Jesus refers to himself*] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus says to his disciples: this is the very reason I came.

We're familiar with the TV show 'Undercover Boss' where CEOs of major companies dress up in disguises and are filmed interacting with bottom level employees. Well, Jesus is the ultimate undercover boss. The book of Colossians claims that before the Son of God came to earth, all things were created by Him, through Him and for Him—that He existed before all things and that in Him all things hold together.<sup>4</sup> The claim is that the Son of God is the boss of the whole world. And yet, the book of Philippians tells us that "he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant."<sup>5</sup> The Son of God, the boss of the whole world, the one who has ruled all things from eternity past, went undercover as a man—as a servant.

He did this, as verse 45 in our passage tells us, "to give his life as a ransom for many." You remember James and John want to occupy the places to Jesus' right and Jesus' left in his glory? Well, where is Jesus' glory most truly shown on earth? At the cross. And as he was being crucified, in that unexpected moment of glory, there *were* two men next to him—one at his right, and one at his left. Both of them criminals who deserved to die; just like we deserve to die because we have all rejected the Source of Life—God Himself—and we have turned away in our sin. But hear the good news: It is at the cross that we see the true glory of the Son who was willing to forsake everything, even his perfect relationship with His Father, that we might be set free. As Jesus says in our passage, he became "a slave to all" so that he might "give his life as a ransom for many."

You see, Jesus could have lorded it over us. He could have come on his throne and struck fear and dread into all of us. He could have used his power and authority to strike fear into our hearts and get his way. But he didn't. Jesus chose to serve. Jesus is the ultimate leader, the ultimate boss, not because he was first, but because he chose to be a slave to all. Jesus showed us that great leadership is not the way of the throne, but the way of the cross. He sacrificed Himself for us, and in so doing, set us free from our selfish desires, so that we might sacrifice ourselves for others, that the world might thrive. And when people ask why we do it, why we sacrifice ourselves for them, that they might thrive, we say: because Jesus did it for me.

Great leadership is not the way of the throne, but the way of the cross. And the cross is not only our example, but it is our power. It is by the cross that we are set free from a need to do it on our own, from a need to be successful, from a need to have power. And it is by the cross that we are enabled to rely upon the Holy Spirit living in us to empower and enable

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<sup>4</sup> Colossians 1:16-17

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:6-7

us to sacrifice ourselves for those around us. So, fathers, as you leave on this Father's Day, remember that this is how we are to lead our families—the way of the cross. Business leaders, remember that this is how you are to lead in business—the way of the cross. And everyone here, remember that you are called to lead those around, no matter what your rank or position is, because true leadership is not about your title, it is about loving those around you. Great leadership is not the way of the throne, but the way of the cross.

## **Sermon Questions**

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
  
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
  
- DIG DEEPER
  1. How do you picture great leadership? Do you see yourself as a leader? Why / why not?
  2. Where have you led in the way of the throne, by 'lording it over' people (v. 42)?
  3. What would it look like for you to lead in the way of the cross, serving others (v. 43-44)?
  4. What difference does it make to your leadership that Jesus 'came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (v. 45)?