

Through the Looking-Glass

Mark 10: 35-45

Rev. Mike Fielding

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I would like to begin by reading a verse from the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. Verse 12 points to something we will be discussing today – the reversal we find in God’s Kingdom.

1 Corinthians 13:12

12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Welcome. How are you feeling today? With all the changes around here, I know some are feeling quite anxious about what the future holds. Some are excited. And others are hesitant to feel anything just yet. If you aren’t sure about what changes I’m talking about, let me give you a very brief history. Over the past couple of years at Handley Meadowbrook Christian Church, we have seen quite a bit of change. We have had a major change in our pastoral leadership. We have introduced a few new programs and have seen some long-time programs come to an end. We bought a van and still find ourselves learning about ways to utilize it. Our staff has grown and our membership has grown. And now we find ourselves at a critical level of membership that directly affects our ministry style and capabilities. We have recently begun talks about a shared vision of ministry with Sandy Lane Christian Church and are contemplating what a unified ministry would look like. And so this morning, I am curious. How are you feeling today? I only ask because whether you are feeling excited or fearful or unsure about what the future holds for our church, there is definite hope for our future. If we move prudently, if we act wisely, and if we hold to the natural law of God’s Kingdom, I believe that hope can become and will remain clear and evident to us as a congregation and as a part of the whole people of God.

And that brings us to the question of the day. I said we had to hold to the natural law of God’s Kingdom, so what is the natural law of God’s Kingdom? I have to be honest; this is not a term that is commonly used by teachers, pastors, or theologians. If you try to look it up on the Internet or in a Bible Dictionary you will probably be disappointed. But if we search our scripture reading for the day we might just find something that illustrates this law. It is a law of reversal. Whatever you find to be true in this world may not be true in God’s Kingdom. Things are reversed there. And the more we look at this reversal and the more we practice it, we find that the natural law of God’s Kingdom is desirable and preferred to the natural law of this world.

Our scripture reading is from the book of Mark, the 10th chapter and begins with the request two brothers make of Jesus:

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

37 *They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."*

There is something about this part of the scripture I find entertaining. You parents can probably identify with Jesus here a bit because James and John are putting Jesus in a place of almost parental authority. The brothers say to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." And when a child says this, any parent would naturally respond, "Ask me first and then I'll answer," which is also how Jesus responds. And their request is for honor and glory. They believe that Jesus is going to come to power and they want to be right beside him when he does. It is not an unusual request. If you were able to invest money at the ground floor of the computer boom and you knew it was going to boom you would probably jump at the chance. Just imagine what your stock in Microsoft would be worth today if you had invested as soon as they went public. Well, James and John knew Jesus was coming to power. They believed it enough to try to garner the choice spots next to Jesus when he finally arrived at his throne. It isn't surprising that they wanted those spots because that is how our world works. If there is money or power or recognition to be had, we don't mind having it. Whether it is thrust upon us or we have to constantly nag to receive it, places of power are coveted. But that is the natural law of this world. It is not the natural law of God's Kingdom. We can tell from Jesus' response that he realizes these brothers are naive and they are living by this world's natural law.

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?"*

39 *"We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with,*

40 *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."*

There are two bits of imagery used in the response Jesus gives that need to be cleaned up if they are to be understood correctly. He mentions drinking from a cup and being baptized. But the way Jesus uses these terms is not consistent with what we typically think of in this day and age. When we take communion, the servers commonly say, "The bread of heaven and the cup of salvation." In Jewish tradition the cup commonly symbolized life. When writing of full life, the Psalmist writes, "My cup overflows." But the cup could also symbolize wrath or death. In the garden, Jesus asks God to take away the cup because he does not want to drink of it. In mentioning baptism, Jesus is not referring to what we typically think of as baptism. In fact the word he uses is much closer to being covered with water or being drowned. In understanding this, the question, "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" takes on a new meaning. He is referring to his impending death. We have the benefit of scholars and hindsight when recognizing this. James and John did not. Which is why they answer so quickly, "We can."

But we can't be too hard on James and John. They were operating under the same understanding that many of us operate under – honor and glory are synonymous with leadership. Also, they were not the only ones who felt this way.

41 *When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.*

You see, the other disciples felt the same way James and John did, but they were a little slower in vying for those positions of importance. That may be why they became indignant. The scripture doesn't really say why they were upset, but Jesus recognizes the problem and sets them all straight. He sits down with them all and reveals what the natural law of God's Kingdom really is.

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.*

43 *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,*

44 *and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.*

And here we find the central message to this entire gospel.

45 *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."*

Jesus points out power – power that is subject to the natural law of this world – and tells them it is to be different with them. They are to live by a better law. It is a law that is natural to God's Kingdom. Serve. Give. If you want true greatness, serve. If you want to be first, give. It is a complete reversal of what the world teaches.

The disciples had mixed up priorities. Sometimes we do too. Sometimes we expect God to make everything okay for us, to do things for us, to give us supreme responsibility because we are good people and follow God's directions. If we seek this on an earthly plane of existence, there are times we will be sorely disappointed. But when we seek this as a part of God's Kingdom we have to change our priorities to match the natural law of God's Kingdom. We no longer expect glory and honors. We expect to give to others and to place ourselves in a position of service to them. It is being selfless. And selfless does not mean that we ignore or throw away our selves. We have to reverse that concept of selflessness. Selfless means we must give of ourselves just as Christ gave. Christ was so selfless he gave his life as the ultimate sacrifice for the benefit of every person in the world.

I used to wonder what that meant. Why would it matter if Jesus died for my sake? When you look at his death as a consequence of the lifestyle, the philosophy, and the law of God's Kingdom, which he lived to the fullest, his sacrifice was necessary to impress upon us how important this message of service is. His death shows the lengths to which he would follow the natural law of God's Kingdom. And the fact that he rose from the grave ensuring that death is not the end gives each one of us the promise that Jesus' way of life reflects the will of God in heaven. His example was the ultimate example and his sacrifice was the ultimate ransom paid for each of us.

So we must routinely look at our lives and ask if we are truly living for God and serving others. Do we place them first, over and above ourselves? Are we servants? And in our situation at HMCC how is this reversal, this servant mentality, evident in our views of shared future?

Church growth can mean lots of things. It can mean that we will lose certain things, but it can mean we will gain as well. We may not have things the way they have always been or the

way we are comfortable with them. But when we put others first and realize our servanthood, church growth can mean that our family is growing and that we have an opportunity to serve on a grander scale. It is not about the numbers of people that come. It is about reaching others with the good news of Christ. It is about forging relationships and ministry in ways and circumstances that have not been available in the past.

How are you feeling today? I am feeling great because there is hope for our future. We can be assured that our future is safe and secure and there is hope. If we focus on the natural law of God's Kingdom – of being servants – we can move forward into whatever the future holds with confidence that our lives reflect the living example of Jesus the Christ. Amen.