

Mark 10:35-45 (NKJV)

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" ³⁷ They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it is prepared." ⁴¹ And when the ten heard *it*, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John. ⁴² But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. ⁴⁴ And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

To get the full picture we need to look at the parallel passage in Matthew.

Matthew 20:20-28 (NKJV)

²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. ²¹ And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." ²² But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." ²³ So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it is prepared by My Father." ²⁴ And when the ten heard *it*, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave-- ²⁸ just as the Son

of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

It is important to understand that the mother of James and John was probably Salome. Salome was the sister of Mary, Jesus's mother. So this was very clearly a play by these disciples to use family relationships as leverage to get what they wanted.

James and John had clearly calculated what their best chance was at procuring a good management position. They probably figured their mother was **an ace in the hole**. Jesus would have had an element of respect for His mother's mother. James and John may have thought that Jesus would be foolish enough to grant their request, if coming from His aunt, without ever hearing the request.

We can rest assured that James and John discussed their approach. They planned it out. They thought about exactly **what** they should say and **how** they should say it in order to most assure their success.

We can also guess that they didn't care how this would affect the rest of the disciples. Think about this. They were not going to be able to keep this a secret. They would have known the animosity it would raise with the rest of the group. But they cared more about their power seat than they did about the rest of the disciples.

It is very likely that the idea for this request had its origins in James and John. So Mark could leave Salome out of the picture and it did little to change the outcome of the story.

Now Jesus had just told the disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to die. But these disciples were "future" deaf. Whenever Jesus talked about what was going to happen to Him, they could not hear it. It would not register in their brains. Obviously again, these two disciples serve as an example that we should not follow. Rather than focus on the needs of Jesus, rather than listen to Him and prepare for what He said, all that ran through their minds was how to gain an advantage for themselves.

It was interesting at my job at a corporation watching people jockeying for the best positions. And then once they got their positions, it was interesting watching them jockeying for influence with those who were higher on the ladder than they were. Nothing has changed. In the world that is what happens, but this should never be happening inside the church. We cannot allow that part of ourselves to be active in trying to jockey for better positions of authority and influence inside the church.

How saddened Jesus must have been at this request. Can you imagine being in His spot. He only had a short time left, and here is His A-team, His inside circle. Really, is this the best they can do?

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²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. ²¹ And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom."

So James and John and Salome approach Christ. They kneel down. They are really going all out in this thought through strategy. Kneeling down would have displayed that they regarded Christ as being superior to them. It would have also shown their compliance to His will. So they are posturing all the right things. Then they together somehow ask Jesus to grant a request. By the way it is worded, it looks like they want Jesus to agree to granting the request without knowing what it is.

They should have known by now that such an approach would never work with Christ. After all, He knew the hearts of men. We have already seen that he doesn't exactly drop everything when someone plays the family card.

So what is the request?

They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory."

She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom."

It is not difficult to imagine this. First the mother asks for her sons to get these choice positions. Jesus says nothing. In fact He acts like He doesn't even hear it. Then James and John, thinking they need to help Jesus understand it say it again. Or maybe it happened the other way around.

You know, if this request had been different, this event could have had a very different ending.

Think of all the things they could have said. Think of all the genuine responses that were fitting to Jesus. They could have knelt down and praised Him. They could have knelt down and asked His forgiveness. They could have knelt down and asked Jesus for all the things they long for in order to better please Him and better serve Him. This could have been a very good thing. But in the guise of worshipping Christ, they are really just trying to use Christ to worship themselves.

Does this remind us of any other scripture?

James 4:1-10 (NKJV)

¹ Where do wars and fights *come* from among you? Do *they* not *come* from your *desires for* pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. (And this is the part that speaks exactly to what James and John are doing in our text). ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.

⁴ Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"? ⁶ But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "*God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.*" ⁷ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *you* double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and *your* joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Both of these texts are addressing the same thing. It is the problem of approaching God with a backwards perspective.

How easy it is to fool ourselves. How easy it is to think that because we are kneeling before God.... that we are praying to God, that we have gotten ourselves into a compliant mental attitude before God, to think that we are petitioning for things that God wants.

Prayer was never designed as a way for fleshly people to fulfill fleshly desires. If that is how we see prayer, if that is how we approach God, we are going about it all backwards.

Look at the prayer the Lord prayed. Look how it starts. Look at the mindset **toward God** it assumes before it asks for personal needs.

Matthew 6:9-10 (NKJV)

⁹ In this manner, therefore, pray: **Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.** ¹⁰ **Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as *it is* in heaven.**

Prayer as Jesus taught it always begins with God. It begins with what **He wants**. And it starts with our reorientation to **HIS will**.

First we consider who God is. He is hallowed. He is Holy. He is the one to be worshipped. We start there.

Then we move to what life is about. It is all about **God's kingdom**. And what about God's kingdom? It is about it being accomplished on earth, in us, like it is in heaven. It is not about **God doing our will**. It is about **us becoming obsessed with His will**.

How often we have gotten ourselves in a death spiral of thinking because we approach it all backwards. We come to God with what we want. We know He can do what we ask. But He doesn't. And maybe He won't. And down we go, adding one wrong conclusion to the next. And we waste our time and we do ourselves and everyone in our path harm instead of good. We proclaim the **wisdom of unbelief** and **the foolishness of faith** without needing to speak a word. This isn't just depression. It is the fruit of unbelief.

And the whole problem is we didn't start at the proper starting point. We didn't start with a true reverence for God. We may **think** we did. But we prove by our actions that **we did not**. We did not start with a reorientation to wanting God's will in our lives, no matter what that may cost us.

Really, when is the last time that kind of orientation, that kind of solid trust and submission to God got you in trouble? When is the last time it led you to unbelief and depression? When has it led to powerlessness and hopelessness? That orientation does not travel down that path.

If only Salome and James and John had started there, the rest of our story would be different. If only **we** would start there, the story of our lives would be different.

So Jesus responds to James and John's fleshly request.

³⁸ **But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"**

What James and John think they are asking and what they are really asking are two different things. What they think they are asking is for **a cushy power seat in a new political kingdom**. What they are really asking for is to be **next in line** for the same kind of persecution that Christ would experience.

Now if they are applying for the later, the next question ought to be, "Are you qualified?" And how would you show your qualification for Christ's kingdom? It would be by **your ability to suffer** for Christ's sake. So that is the question Christ asks them. It is essentially, are you able to handle the same kind of suffering that I am about to experience. Because that is what you are signing up for.

And what was their response?

It is as predictable as the sunrise.

³⁹ **They said to Him, "We are able."**

Ambitious flesh always overestimates its abilities. And people often lie to get a good job. James and John think that their request is actually being considered. They smell success. So they are likely going to say **anything** to keep this conversation going.

"Sure. We are the right people for this position. Whatever it takes, we will find a way to do it. We are with you Christ. We will do whatever you say. Just let us have the job."

It strikes me that all of us were a bit like this when we first came to Christ. We had very little idea what we were signing up for. We didn't know ourselves and we didn't know the cost of discipleship. But we said yes, we want this. And then as life went on we found out what "this" is.

And these guys would find out what "this" is.

So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized;

Who was the first disciple martyred? James.

And what about John? He too suffered. He may have died of natural causes. But he probably died in prison, away from his friends and family.

So these guys did show themselves able to suffer well in the long run. In the short run they ran like everyone else. But eventually they grew into their calling and accepted the price of following Christ. Eventually they did share in the cup that Christ drank.

So they would share in the cup, but Christ goes on to talk about the positions they were requesting. And here He does something odd. He essentially says that He is not in charge of Human Resources placement.

⁴⁰ **but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared."**

Essentially Christ's answer is, this isn't in my authority. This is not what I am supposed to be doing. This shows us something about Christ and His relationship to His Father. Christ is perfectly submissive to His Father. And they both have

different jobs. This is not in the realm of Christ's responsibilities or duties. God has it covered.

Second we can see that **preparation** is done for this. And isn't it odd that the **people are not prepared for the positions**, but the **positions are prepared for the people**. I am not sure what significance that has.

There are people who will sit on Christ's left and on His right. But that is God's business.

Now, the next verse is probably one of the least surprising verses in the Bible.

⁴¹ **And when the ten heard it, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John.**

Yep. That would be about how every one of us would respond. We would all feel like, what are we? Chopped liver? Who do you think you are? And we would be right.

But even more than this, James and John were doing something that all of these guys seem to **want to do**. They are probably not so upset that James and John are scrambling for the top spot. They are probably more upset that it could have worked and bumped all the others out of the running. They were more concerned about the **success of their attempt** than **the inappropriateness of their attempt**.

Now Jesus calls everyone together and uses this as one more teaching opportunity. It isn't like the first time He has said this. And it won't be the last. It is something these guys (and we) really need to learn.

⁴² **But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.**

I borrowed a short quote from John MacArthur:

Rulers were and still are ambitious, autocratic, self-promoting, confident, arrogant, prideful, dictatorial, and domineering.

The world has always been filled with ambitious, overconfident, competitive self-promoters, who know no limits to their ambition. Many reach the heights of power. Driven by corrupt, proud hearts, they seek power at the expense of others. Ambition, overconfidence, and competitiveness mark the worldly pursuit of greatness by self-promotion.

MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Mark 9-16.

Our flesh craves such power. We all have in us a desire to be like God. We want everyone to serve our wishes. If we were all to fantasize the ultimate fleshly

experience, it would involve others serving our wishes and us being the center of some small universe. Power seats appeal to the flesh. They always have and they always will. But that is not how the kingdom of God is supposed to run.

⁴³ Yet it shall not be so among you;

This is pretty straight forward. The church is not a place where anyone in authority is to get a fleshly payoff for being so placed. Brad and Mark and Jeremiah and I don't get to tell you what to do at some whim we might have. We can't command you to come over and mow our grass, or command you to volunteer for some service that we think is important. The kingdom doesn't work that way. We have little authority that is self serving. The authority we carry is to apply the word of God in such a way that will do you good, even when it does not feel like it is doing you good.

I can assure you that since these guys have accepted leadership positions, they have probably done more work for you than they had done previously.

Nope, leadership in the church does not give us power for selfish payoff.

but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. ⁴⁴ And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.

This would have been an amazing concept to these guys. Even the Jewish rabbi's would have seen it differently.

Do you want to be a great one in the kingdom of God? That is a good ambition. That is an excellent ambition. Do you want to be an exceptional person? Do you want to be cut apart from the herd and be someone noteworthy in the kingdom of God?

That isn't a bad question. It is a good one? That is a good thing to want to be. I hope there is something in all of us that says, yes, I want to be that kind of person. Christ surely deserves that from me. Oh, I want to be great in that way. OK, How do I do it? How do I accomplish that?

Well, look around this morning. Look at the people sitting all around you. Look at the people who would normally be here. Serve each one of them. Get to know them. Find out what they need. And spend yourself to bring it to them. Steve Vanvalkenburg challenged us to pray for them. That is a loving Christian ministry. But often God will lead us to do more than pray. We are often led to use our time and resources to meet their needs. But like Caleb said, we do not know each other's needs without talking to one another.

How do you know when you are getting better at this? Your service to others becomes freer and freer. You become more and more absorbed with it. And it seems like less and less of a sacrifice.

Then Christ finishes what He has to say.

⁴⁵ **For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."**

So, who is the best example of what we are supposed to be? The author of our faith. Jesus himself.

Who was the person in the universe who most deserved the service of every human on this planet?

Jesus

And who displayed himself as being the best servant this world has ever known?

Jesus

We can rest assured in this. Even if we get to be the best we can possibly be at serving others, we will never live up to the example that Christ set for us. We will never serve as selflessly and as effectively and as graciously as He did.

But you know what? Trying to serve as well as Christ while we look to please only Christ will never do us harm.