

Can You Drink the Cup?

Following Jesus to the Cross: Part 17
Mark 10:32-40 (Mt. 20:20-23) 5/2/2020

Summary:

- 1) Jesus' suffering was necessary; yours is just as necessary. It's God's plan A.
- 2) The battle against our quest for earthly greatness is a daily one. It will take constant effort from now until the day you die to keep your heart aligned with the idea that greatness is when God saying, "Well done" and has nothing to do with how you compare to others.
- 3) When you pray, strive to align your will with God's. And realize the fact that you don't know what you're asking, so God's answers might involve a lot of stretching to enable you to receive it, but what he gives you will always be good.

Introduction 2

Jesus' Announcement 2

Inspiring Us to Follow Where We Don't Want to Go	2
Jesus Confirms Their Fears	3
The Example of the Passion	4
Hope of the Resurrection	5

The Request 5

The Pattern	5
Much Good in This	6
Problem: Seeking Earthly Greatness in the Kingdom.....	6
Human Greatness is Never Satisfied	7
Need Constant Relearning—Like the Alignment on Your Car 7	
Whatever We Ask (Lesson on Prayer and God's Will)	8
What do YOU want Jesus to do for you? 8	
Not Your Will but My Will Be Done 8	

Jesus' Response 9

The Cup Before the Crown	9
--------------------------------	---

We Can9

Overconfidence	10
Could They? No.	10
Question as a Mirror	10

You Will Drink 10

Suffering as Preparation to Receive	11
---	----

Jesus' Example of Humility: Not for Me To Grant 11

For Whom they Have Been Prepared.....	12
---------------------------------------	----

Conclusion 12

Mark 10:32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. 33 "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will deliver him to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

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." 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.”

Introduction

What would you do if you were in the middle of praying one day, and suddenly, after you made a request, God spoke from heaven and said, “You don’t know what you’re asking”? That happened to James and John in Mark 10, and their response and Jesus’ instruction that followed teaches us a great deal about prayer, and about what it means to be great in the eyes of God.

Jesus’ Announcement

Inspiring Us to Follow Where We Don’t Want to Go

We left off last time with the rich young ruler walking away and Jesus explaining how the first will be last and the last first. Mark picks up the story again in v.32 with a dramatic, tense scene.

Mark 10:32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.

Now, by this point we’re used to the disciples being astonished—they’ve been walking around that way for the last couple years. But this time it’s different. All the other times they’ve been astonished it’s been right after Jesus did a miracle. But not this time. There’s no miracle. So what’s so astonishing? The only thing Mark says is Jesus was walking out ahead of them—outpacing them.¹ Why is that so astonishing? Were they saying, “Wow, Jesus is really booking it. That guy can flat-out mall walk. Look at him go!” No. If you want to know what had the disciples so amazed and the others so afraid, just look at the first line.

32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is where Jesus is going to die. The city of Jerusalem has been the center of opposition against Jesus all through the book of Mark.² And the disciples had seen that. They didn’t fully understand everything Jesus said about his death, but they understood enough to know they didn’t want to understand more (9:32). They knew it was bad, and they knew it would happen in Jerusalem.

So when you see they’re approaching Jerusalem, Mark means for you to hear dark, ominous music in the background. And then he wants you to see their body language.

32 They were on their way up to Jerusalem with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.

So there’s Jesus charging out ahead, the disciples dragging their feet, and another group of followers trailing behind even further, shaking in their boots because Jesus is leading them straight into the lions’ den.

I love this verse because it’s a snapshot of what the church looks like when Jesus leads us somewhere we don’t want to go. There’s a crossroads with a bunch of signs, and one of them says, “lowliness, humiliation, suffering, and death,” and Jesus takes that road. And his followers are standing

¹ The NIV says “**leading the way**”—the word literally means *to go ahead*.

² In ch. 3 a delegation of authorities from Jerusalem came and pronounced that Jesus was satanic (3:22). In ch. 7 another delegation from Jerusalem came and confronted Jesus on violating the traditions of the elders, which was a big deal. Then in ch.8, when Jesus gave the first announcement of his death, he stated plainly that it would happen at the hands of the Sanhedrin.

there saying, “Really? We’re taking that road?” And they follow, but in slow motion—like when your kids are watching TV and you tell them they need to go to bed.

But Jesus is pushing out ahead of them because it’s time to get this nightmare over with. He didn’t want to suffer, but he was eager to accomplish the work.

Luke 12:50 But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!

Jesus is about to teach them (and us) some important principles about following him down that road, and the whole lesson is illustrated in this dramatic snapshot in verse 32. Our heroic Savior leads the way, a fixed purpose stamped upon his face, urgency in his pace, confidently striding ahead of us with determination and poise. And even in our confusion and fear and timidity, we look at him and we’re inspired to follow. This is the very definition of heroism—an iron will, incapable of deflection, plunging ahead into a world of suffering to follow his Father’s will. If I were an artist, I think this is the verse I would try to depict. What a marvelous image.

Jesus Confirms Their Fears

So what does Jesus do? He picks up on their body language. He sees their apprehension, so he stops. He lets them catch up, then pulls the 12 aside from the others and gives them some private instruction. And what does he say? Does he say, “Don’t worry guys—it’s going to be okay. We’ll get through this ...”? No, just the opposite. He confirms their worst fears.

32 ... Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him.

Just the 12. The rest of his followers don’t get to hear it. Jesus reserves his clearest and most important revelations for those who are most serious about following him. These are the men who had left everything to follow him, they’ve put it all on the line to be identified with him—in this scene they are even physically closer to Jesus. The group who are afraid are lagging further behind. The closer you walk with Jesus, the more revelation he gives you.

33 “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered³ to the chief priests and teachers of the law.

The word “**delivered**” means to turn someone over to the control of someone else. Someone was going to have power over Jesus—enough power to be able to hand Jesus over to the control of the Sanhedrin—the Supreme Court of Israel.

33 ... They will condemn him to death and will deliver him to the Gentiles

Jesus will get passed around—this time to the Gentiles.⁴ The Jews didn’t have the legal authority to execute anyone, so for them to give Jesus the death penalty would require the Romans to agree to it and carry it out. What could be worse than for the Jewish Messiah to be under the control of Gentiles and executed by them? 34 who will mock him and spit on him It doesn’t get any more humiliating than having Gentiles spit on you. When Jesus talks about his suffering, he talks more about the shame and humiliation and the insults and ridicule than he does about the physical torture. That was a huge part of Jesus’ work of redemption.

34 ... flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

³ The NIV translates this word “betrayed,” but the idea of betrayal is not inherent in the word. The term simply means to turn someone over to the control of someone else. If it’s a friend who does it, then it could be called betrayal, but there is nothing in this context that would indicate it’s the work of a friend.

⁴ I’ve heard people debate about whether it was the Jews or the Romans who were responsible for Jesus’ death. That’s a bizarre debate, since it was clearly both. I don’t even know why that’s a debate. It’s not anti-Semitic to acknowledge that the Jews were involved any more than it’s anti-Italian to say the Roman were involved. The truth is, the entire human race is at fault.

That's the fifth time in Mark where Jesus has let them know about his upcoming suffering,⁵ and this is the most detailed announcement yet. This is the first time he gives the details about mocking and spitting and flogging, and the Gentiles being involved. "You guys are nervous because you think horrible things are going to happen in Jerusalem? You don't know the half of it."

Why does Jesus do that? Is he trying to scare them senseless? No. Jesus has three very important purposes in these passion predictions. First, it's crucial that they understand that his suffering and death are necessary.

Mark 8:31 The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders ... he must be killed Mark 9:12 ... the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected.

And he says it again in this passage.⁶ They need to know this was all planned by God. The cross isn't God just allowing evil to run amuck and then coming along behind and making something good out of it. It wasn't plan B. It was plan A from before the foundation of the world. It couldn't have been any other way. It's not a plan that can be altered or adjusted. It must happen, and it must happen exactly as Jesus said it would happen. (Which it does. You read the rest of the book and you find that this announcement of his suffering in vv. 33-34 read like a table of contents for the rest of the book of Mark.⁷ It happens exactly as Jesus lays it out.) There is a world of difference in your ability to handle suffering if you know it's part of the plan, as opposed to thinking the plan is falling apart.

The Example of the Passion

That's one reason Jesus keeps brining this up—to make sure they know it's God's plan. Another reason is to make sure they know they are part of that plan. Remember the first time he told them about his death.

Mark 8:31 ... Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed ... 34 If anyone would follow me, he must ... take up his cross."

Every time he shows us his destiny, he reminds us that it's our destiny too. So much of the book of Mark is devoted to preparing the disciples to join in his suffering. That is required of every Christian.

⁵ Most commentators refer to three, because there were three instances in which Jesus stated the matter plainly to all twelve disciples in three consecutive chapters (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). In addition to those three I would add Jesus' statement, vague as it was, in ch.2 that the bridegroom would be taken from them, and on that day they would fast; and his statement to the three after the transfiguration, "the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected" (9:12).

It does seem that Mark wants to showcase the three that are usually noted, however, as each follows the same pattern. Jesus gives the prophecy, and the disciples are shown as seeking their own greatness. The fact that Mark places such similar statements followed by the same response so close together (even though a year may have passed between Mark 9 and 10—the entire Judean ministry described in John 7-11 and Luke 7-18—shows that Mark wants the reader to see these three alongside one another.

⁶ The wording Jesus uses "what was going to happen" denotes not merely a possibility but a future certainty.

⁷ "We are going up to Jerusalem," (ch. 11ff), "The Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and teachers of the law" (ch. 14), "They will condemn him to death" (ch. 14), "and will deliver him to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him." (ch. 15), "Three days later he will rise." (ch. 16).

It follows what happened so specifically that the critics speculate that this passage must have been added later by the church—not because of any actual historical evidence along that line (there is none), but only because the information seems too specific for Jesus to have known in advance. They say the first two predictions were okay—Jesus might have said those because a reasonable person could have seen the handwriting on the wall with all the opposition in Jerusalem and make an educated guess that he would be killed. But this prediction—it's too specific. The condemnation by the Sanhedrin, delivering over to the Gentiles, spitting, flogging—he couldn't have seen all that coming.

Arguments like that leave me scratching my head. All the predictions of Jesus' suffering have one thing in common—he'll die and rise from the dead after three days. How do the scholars miss that? He's claiming he will rise from the dead and their complaint is that his prediction of his suffering is too specific? Jesus says, "I AM—I'm the Almighty, Creator God. I'm the Daniel 7 Son of Man who will be worshipped by all forever and ever in divine glory. I will be flogged and killed and then I will rise from the dead!" And they say, "Wait a minute—how do you know you'll be flogged?"

1 Peter 2:20 If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

Hope of the Resurrection

So Jesus wants them to know this is plan A, he wants them to understand they're part of that plan and must suffer with him, and then, most importantly, he wants to place their hope in the right place.

34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.

Every time he tells them about his death, he ends by telling them he will rise. On the other side of the valley of the shadow of death will be glorious new life. And that's where our hope must be placed. Our tendency is to place our hope in avoiding the dark valley. We just want to just camp out here on the safe side of the valley and avoid the suffering. And Jesus heroically, resolutely leads the way right through that valley to glory on the other side. If we remain skittish about suffering, we'll never be able to follow close by him as he leads us. So, 1) realize this is God's plan, 2) realize you're part of the plan, and 3) set your hope on the resurrection. That's how you can stop dragging your heels when Jesus leads you where you don't want to go.

The Request

The Pattern

So how do you think the disciples will respond? So far, every time Jesus has told them about his suffering and death, it went in one ear and out the other and they responded with some form of seeking their own, earthly greatness.⁸ Then Jesus would correct them: "No. Not earthly greatness. *Kingdom* greatness!" And then he'd explain how that kingdom greatness comes only through earthly lowliness. We saw that in ch.8, we saw the exact same pattern again in ch.9, and now, in ch.10, Jesus once again starts talking about how he's going to suffer and die, and so if you've been tracking through the last two chapters you think, *Okay, here we go again*. How will the disciples respond this time? Will they finally get the point about seeking kingdom greatness instead of earthly greatness?

33 ... the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will deliver him to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

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 glory⁹."

I guess if you're going for greatness, you might as well shoot for the moon. They don't mess around—"Jesus, we just want to be the two most important men in heaven. Can you make that happen?" This gives you a feel for why Jesus nicknamed these two the *sons of thunder*. They aren't timid personality types.

⁸ He told them about his death four times in ch. 8-10. One of the four was given only to Peter, James, and John on the mount of transfiguration (9:12). The other three are easy to find, as they appear around the same place in each chapter (8:30, 9:30, 10:32). These events were most likely spread over more than a year's time, but Mark clusters them together to show us the pattern.

⁹ Matthew's account: "in your kingdom" (Mt.20:21).

Much Good in This

After Jesus has given so much instruction about not seeking human greatness, how could they make a request like this? I have two answers to that. The first one is that they're request might not be as bad as you think. There's actually a lot of good in it.¹⁰ Think about it—what has Jesus been telling them? Don't seek your own greatness? No. What he's been telling them is, "Don't seek *earthly* greatness. Instead, seek kingdom greatness." In chapter 9 Jesus gave them a whole lesson on how to be the greatest in the kingdom, and he's going to repeat that here in this passage. **43 ... whoever wants to become great among you must ...** and then he goes on to explain how. So what Jesus wanted was for them to seek kingdom greatness instead of earthly greatness—Isn't that what James and John were doing?

37 Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.

That's kingdom greatness, right? They didn't ask for positions of power in the Roman government or the Jewish system. They put all their eggs in the basket of Jesus' future glory. There's so much that's good in this request. Faith, for one thing. They are looking at this lowly, ordinary-looking man who has been rejected by all the Jerusalem big shots and the powers that be, and even his own family, and they're still going to completely hitch their wagons to this man's future glory? That's faith. We're quick to criticize them, but surely it was pleasing to Christ that all their hope was in Jesus' future glory.

That is commendable, and it puts us to shame in many ways. What would you ask for if you had one wish? If you could have anything you want from Jesus, would your first request be something having to do with Christ's future glorious kingdom? Or would it be something about your bills this month or your aches and pains or some family problem? What kinds of requests do we bring to Jesus in our daily prayers? Do they have anything to do with his future glory? James and John are on the right track in many ways.

Problem: Seeking Earthly Greatness in the Kingdom

They probably thought they were doing exactly what Jesus had taught them to do—seek kingdom glory not earthly glory. But here's the problem: they are seeking greatness *in* the kingdom, but it's not kingdom greatness they're seeking. They're still defining greatness in earthly ways. What is the definition of greatness from an earthly point of view? Greatness is being greater than other people. You're great when you rise above the competition. That's our only measuring stick, right? Are you a fast runner? Usain Bolt is a fast runner, right? How fast is he? He can run 27 mph. Since when is 27 mph fast? It's fast for one reason—it's faster than other people can run. That's human greatness—outperforming other people.

What's the definition of true greatness—kingdom greatness? Very simple.

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. (by God the Father)¹¹

Who gets the top spots? Whoever God says. Why? Because God said. What's the definition of true greatness? You're great when God says you're great.

How you compare to other people is irrelevant because there's just too much you don't know. You don't know how hard their road was, how much natural ability they have, what kind of unseen factors are involved. God's the only one capable of assessing how well a person is doing given all relevant factors, so

¹⁰ Their question seems, at first, to lack compassion—right after hearing about Jesus' torture, they ask about their own greatness. But for all we know, they did have a compassionate response. We don't know what their immediate response was. Notice verse 35—it says they **came to him**. That sounds to me like it must have been some time later. When Jesus describes his suffering, he's talking to all 12. But when James and John come to him, it's just those two and Jesus alone.

¹¹ Implied by Mark; stated explicitly by Matthew (Mt.20:23).

the only meaningful standard of greatness is his assessment. You're great when God is pleased with you, period.

So which kind of greatness are James and John seeking? The earthly kind. They're defining greatness in the earthly way—rising above the other ten.

Human Greatness is Never Satisfied

Jesus had just got done telling them that the 12 would be exalted in amazing ways.

Matthew 19:28 ... “when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

They're going to replace the patriarchs. They would be the 12 most important men in the history of the world. The Zebedee boys hear that and think, “What? We're the same as these other ten guys? I don't think so. Give us a little credit.”

They don't want to just be in the top 12; they want to be Vice President and Chief of Staff. They're not even satisfied with being in the top 3. We've seen it again and again—Peter, James, and John—the inner 3. Only those three get to see the Transfiguration and all these other important events. Of the seven times these James and John are mentioned in the gospel, this is the only time they are mentioned without Peter, so the fact that Peter's not there is noticeable.¹² Jesus only has two hands, right? Right hand, left hand—Peter gets one of those, that means one of the Zebedee boys is out. Peter's already emerging as a leader. So the sons of thunder corner Jesus in a moment when Peter isn't there and make their move—trying to squeeze Peter out of that top spot. Top 12 wasn't enough, top 3 wasn't enough, and if Jesus had given them the 1 and 2 spots, what do you want to bet the one who got #2 would be saying, “Wait—I was thinking my brother would get that spot”?

This is the way it goes with human greatness—you never arrive. This is why billionaires are still trying to get richer. They already have more money than they could spend in their lifetime, but they haven't made it to that next echelon above them yet. The quest for earthly greatness is a never-ending chasing after the wind.

So they thought they were seeking kingdom greatness, but really they were just seeking earthly greatness in the kingdom. That doesn't work.

Need Constant Relearning—Like the Alignment on Your Car

So back to our question, *How could they be so dense?* After all Jesus' teaching about true greatness—how could they be so slow to get it? I asked that question, and God answered it. The other day I had an incident at work, and another driver, who always tries to find something wrong in what I do, drove 5 miles out of his sector just to check on me. And when he gets there, he sends his trainee out to come tell me I was doing it wrong and that I should reposition my truck. He didn't know I wasn't positioned in the normal way because I had to use my air compressor on a flat tire. So I'm working this incident, helping a guy with a problem I know that other driver wouldn't have been able to handle, and I get ordered around by a trainee being trained by a guy that hasn't even worked there as long as I have.

After the incident was over and I was driving away, I found myself really irritated about that whole deal. And I just stewed in irritation for quite a while before it hit me that that was God's answer to my question. How could James and John get this lesson from Jesus so many times and still keep striving for earthly greatness? Because they were exactly like me. I've been studying this material about not seeking earthly greatness for months now, and still, someone steps a little bit on my earthly greatness, and I'm all upset about it. Maybe the reason this lesson is repeated so many times in a row in the Gospel of Mark is to show us how often we need to keep relearning it. Learning humility is like the alignment on your car.

¹² 1:16–20, 29; 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33, though cf. 9:38 for John alone.

No matter how straight you get it, all it takes is a few potholes and you're right back out of alignment. No matter how much you do away with the quest for earthly greatness, it sneaks back in some other form. And even in our best moments and our strongest faith, like James and John, the quest for human greatness worms its way even into our best efforts to serve God.

Whatever We Ask (Lesson on Prayer and God's Will)

Okay, so we can see what's good about their request and we can see what's wrong with it—they're still stuck on earthly greatness. But let's look another level down, because there's something deeper that's wrong with this request. Look at how they approach 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."

They're trying to get Jesus to sign a blank check. Why? Why not just walk up and make their request? They want Jesus to do for them what Herod did for Herodias' daughter when she came in and danced and he said, "I'll give you whatever you ask." Kings did that to show how much they favored the person. James and John are part of the inner 3, they have Jesus' favor, and they're banking on Jesus saying, "Sure guys—anything."

Jesus doesn't fall for it.

35 ... "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." 36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

He makes them tell him the request first.

What do YOU want Jesus to do for you?

Think about that question for a second—"What do you want me to do for you?" It's a penetrating question, isn't it? Jesus asks exactly the same question in the next paragraph—in a very different context, with blind Bartimaeus. What if Jesus asked you that question—what would you say? How you answer that question reveals your character.

If Jesus asked me, in my best moments I hope I'd say, "Lord, I want you to use me to increase your glory in the eyes of men." But in a lot of other moments, the real answer is more like what James and John wanted. "Lord, increase *my* glory in the eyes of men." We don't say it in those words, but deep down we crave recognition, appreciation, approval, admiration.

Not Your Will but My Will Be Done

So why did they ask for this blank check? When you try to get a "yes" before revealing your request, it's because you're afraid the answer will be "no" otherwise, right? They knew Jesus wouldn't really like this idea, so they use this tactic to try to get something they wanted even though they suspected Jesus didn't want it.

Think about that approach to prayer. Another way of saying that is, "Not your will, Jesus, but my will be done. Instead of seeking your will, I want to bend your will to match mine. I want you to realign your agenda to match mine."

When we cling to our will above God's will, it's both evil and foolish. It's evil because it shows you trust your own judgment more than you trust God's judgment. And it's foolish because we don't even realize what we're asking half the time.

Jesus' Response

38 You don't know what you are asking.¹³

I wonder how often God says that when I make a request. "Darrell, you have no idea what you just asked for."

The Cup Before the Crown

What were they asking for?

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?"

Evidently, by asking to be at his right and left, they were asking to drink his cup and take his baptism. The cup refers to your lot in life. Jesus had made it clear that his lot was to be one of suffering, humiliation, and death. Not too many days after this Jesus would find himself begging the Father to let this cup pass from him. He didn't want to drink it. I'm convinced the baptism refers to the same thing.¹⁴ To be baptized means to be immersed or engulfed by something. Jesus was going to be engulfed by horrific suffering. It's similar to the language of Psalm 42:7.

Psalm 42:7 ... all your waves and breakers have swept over me.

Jesus asks James and John, "Are you capable of drinking from my cup of suffering? Can you withstand the title wave pain that's about to slam into me?"

There's only one other time in Mark where it talks about the right and left of Christ. Where is it? Who ends up at the right and left of Jesus at the end of the book of Mark? The two criminals on crosses. James and John didn't realize—that the sort of thing they were asking for. Drinking that cup is the only way to share in his glory. Romans 8:17 ... we are ... co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Chris, my son-in-law, runs a race every year called the Tough Mudder. It's a brutal race that involves a lot of mud and a lot of toughness. Imagine he's at the starting line, and Sadie, his 3-year-old daughter is there and says, "Daddy, I want to go with you." What would he say? "You don't know what you're asking, Sadie. Can you run through all that mud and past all those obstacles?"

We Can

38 ... "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" 39 "We can," they answered.

¹³ Each statement begins with the Greek conjunction, *de*. The most natural translation of that word is "but," though it very often means "and." I don't know if Mark meant it as an adversative here. Probably not. But the uses of it do illustrate how Jesus and the Zebedee boys are on two very different plains in the conversation.

35 ... "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

36 BUT Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?"

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

38 BUT Jesus said, "You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

39 BUT they answered, "We can."

BUT 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."

¹⁴ In Matthew's account, he only mentions the cup—presumably because that covers both ideas.

Overconfidence

I don't think they're listening. Jesus just said, "**you don't know what you are asking.**" You'd think that might give them a little bit of pause, but this is the way we are. Once our heart gets set on something, we become deaf to anything that tries to point us in another direction. So they don't have to stop and think about it, they don't need to talk it over, they don't ask any clarifying questions—they're ready with their answer. "Drink your cup? No problem!"¹⁵ The same pride that makes us seek human greatness also makes us overestimate our own capabilities and character.

Could They? No.

Were they right? Were they capable of drinking Jesus' cup? Nope. The night before the crucifixion they couldn't even stay up and pray with him. They kept falling asleep (14:32-42). The next morning when they came and arrested Jesus ...

Mark 14:50 Then everyone deserted him and fled.

Could they drink his cup? No. They couldn't even *pray* about drinking it, much less drink it.

So the answer to Jesus' question is no, they can't drink his cup. They think they can, but that's only because they have no real concept of what's in that cup. Not only did they not understand what they were asking, they didn't understand what they were answering either, when they said, "We can." If they had known what any of this meant, they wouldn't have waited until Gethsemane to desert Jesus and flee. They would have started running right then.

Question as a Mirror

Why does Jesus ask them if they can drink the cup instead of just telling them that sitting at his right and left would require drinking the cup? Why does he put it to them as a question that they aren't even going to answer the right way? He asks instead of tells because his objective isn't to just shove information into their heads; it's to draw out what's in their hearts. When Jesus asks you a question, it usually isn't to see if you know the right answer. It's to hold up a mirror and show you the attitudes and values deep down inside you. He's exposing their pride.

You Will Drink

But then look at what Jesus says.

39 ... "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with.

They weren't capable now, but something was going to happen that would make them capable, and after that, they would indeed drink the cup. After Jesus' resurrection, when they saw him with their own eyes, all the disciples were completely changed. And they all drank the cup. They suffered horribly for Christ—humiliation, shame, whippings, beatings. James was the first of the 12 to be martyred. Herod had him executed. John's suffering may have been even worse because he lived to be an old man, so he suffered for a longer period.

Back to the illustration with Chris and Sadie—I can also picture him saying, "I tell you the truth Sadie—you *will* run the race with me someday and be baptized with the mud I'm baptized with. You don't realize that you just asked for years of hard training with me. But the answer is yes."

If you say, "Jesus, I want to be at your side at the top of that mountain," he'll say, "That's great, but for that to happen, you have to walk with me through that valley between here and the mountain." If you

¹⁵ It's a lot like what we just saw in the rich young ruler in the previous paragraph ("keep all the commands? No problem.")

want to be close to Jesus, you go where he goes, and he walks through the valley of pain, ridicule, rejection, and lowliness.

So often we ask God for things he's eager to give us, but that we're not ready to receive. And so our prayer begins a long process of preparation. If your 5-year-old asks for a pocket knife and shotgun and chainsaw, what do you say? He probably knows better than to ask Mom, but if he asks Dad, Dad might say, "Yeah, I like the way you're thinking. But it's going to take some years to get you ready." I think a lot of our prayer requests get delayed just because we're 5 and we're asking for a chain saw for our birthday.

Suffering as Preparation to Receive

But we shouldn't take the delay to mean God is reluctant to give to us. And we shouldn't interpret suffering as a sign of his displeasure. It may be just the opposite. It may be delayed and you may go through suffering because (mark this) *In order for you to receive God's greatest gifts, very often God has to do a major work in you to enable you to receive the thing you asked for.*

Psalm 81:10 ... Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.

The serving size is limited only by the stretch of the jaws. And sometimes we ask for things that won't fit in our tiny little mouths, and so God has to do some stretching first before he can answer our prayer. So then the question isn't whether God is willing to give you what you asked, but rather are you willing to let God do the work that needs to be done in you in order for you to receive it?

I wonder how often we pray for something that requires stretching, and then we start praying for the stretching to stop? How many of our prayers are prayers for God to remove the very thing he's using to enable us to receive his blessings we asked for in a previous prayer?

Jesus' Example of Humility: Not for Me To Grant

So being at Jesus' side requires drinking his cup of suffering, James and John will drink that cup, so does that mean they will get what they asked for?

39 ... 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."¹⁶

This is a rough day for the sons of thunder. They wanted the crown without the cross, and instead they get the cross without the crown. They still have to drink the cup—but no guarantees on their positions in heaven.

Jesus doesn't say for sure that they won't have the 1 and 2 positions; he just says it's not for him to grant. Why not? Is he not the King of kings? Didn't he just call himself the Son of Man? Listen to what Daniel 7 says about the Son of Man.

Daniel 7:14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

How is it that the one who has all authority, glory, and sovereign power, but he doesn't get to decide his #1 and 2 men? Why? Because Jesus is serving as an example of the very principle James and John need to learn—humility. James and John wanted positions of power and influence by being close to Jesus. And Jesus says, "Sorry, I don't have the power and influence to grant that. You want to be the ones calling the shots? I can't call that shot."

¹⁶ Matthew adds, "...by my Father" (Mt.20:23).

That must have landed on them like a ton of bricks—if they gave it any thought at all. The one who has all authority and sovereign power willingly let go of the power to even choose his own chief of staff? Maybe in his human nature Jesus would have naturally wanted Andrew. But God the Father says, “No, it’s going to be a hideous, despised woman with a jar of perfume.” Jesus is exemplifying the attitude of true greatness by submitting his will to the Father’s.

For Whom they Have Been Prepared

40 to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.

What is God doing to prepare those two places for the two individuals who will be given those positions in eternity? I have no idea. All we know is it’s in the perfect tense, so it’s already been decided. Those positions aren’t up for grabs; the Father’s already decided who gets them, and he’s prepared those positions for those two individuals. And I can also say this—God is preparing a place for you too. I don’t know if it’s one of those two positions, but if you’re a believer, he’s up there preparing a place—designing a place for you.

John 14:2 In my Father's house are many rooms ... I am going there to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

And that’s a theme in Scripture—numerous places the NT speaks of God preparing a place for us in heaven (e.g. Mt.25:34, 1 Cor.2:9, Heb.11:16).¹⁷

Conclusion

We’ve covered a lot.

It might be a good idea to just pick one principle to hang on to and try to engrain it into your belief system.

1) About suffering:

Jesus’ suffering was necessary; yours is just as necessary. It’s God’s plan A.

2) About greatness:

The battle against our quest for earthly greatness is a daily one. It will take constant effort from now until the day you die to keep your heart aligned with the idea that greatness is when God saying, “Well done” and has nothing to do with how you compare to others.

3) About prayer:

When you pray, strive to align your will with God’s. And realize the fact that you don’t know what you’re asking, so God’s answers might involve a lot of stretching to enable you to receive it, but what he gives you will always be good.

¹⁷ The concept of God preparing a place for his people dates back to the conquest of the Promised Land. **Exodus 23:20 "See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.**

Matthew 25:34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

1 Corinthians 2:9 ... "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—

Hebrews 11:16 Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

