

SERVES

Mark 10:32-45

Imagine a situation in which you are going for an important job interview and the only time the interviewer could see you was on a Saturday morning when the place of business is normally closed. The only people there are the interviewer and his secretary and you. You walk in and as the introductions are happening you see a stream of water flowing under the restroom door into the lobby area. Obviously, the toilet has malfunctioned and is overflowing. What do you do? Such a situation could be a test to determine what kind of employee or leader you might be.

Many times in our lives we are presented with such opportunities or tests and our responses to such situations will not only let others know a lot about us, these also can be critical learning times for us as we discover things about ourselves that we never knew before. Even if no one else is watching, we should be. Sometimes we find ourselves thinking in the same way the secular world thinks and we never learn the lesson(s) that the events of life are intended to teach us.

Jesus and His disciples had been together for more than three years. He had taught them in “word and deed” by His examples and they were still being influenced by the ideas that most of the Jews had regarding what the mission of the Messiah was to be. The disciples were still thinking in terms of worldly values. They were asking questions related to which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom that Jesus taught about. Even after the crucifixion and resurrection they were asking “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” It is likely that they were still thinking in terms of the socioeconomic dominance that had characterized their nation under the reigns of David and Solomon.

Death Coming – 10:32-34

³² And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴ And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.” Mark 10:32–34 (ESV)

We pick up the account of Jesus and His disciples returning to Jerusalem after having been away because of the danger posed by the Jewish religious power brokers who were looking for ways to put an end to what Jesus was doing following the incident in which Jesus had raised Lazarus from death. The Passover celebration was approaching and Jesus knew that this was the time when He would be arrested, abused, tried, sentenced to death, crucified, and would “rise again.” He had been occasionally mentioning this to the disciples and as they were headed back to Jerusalem he told them again. The disciples knew that Jerusalem was a dangerous place and they were amazed that Jesus was determined to go toward that danger zone. Some of them realized that they all might die and others thought that this was the start of the overthrow of foreign domination and the establishment of this new kingdom that Jesus had talked about from the beginning of His earthly ministry.

Jesus was sensitive to their amazement and fear, so He took some time to let them know what was going on. This was the third time He told the disciples His death was very near. Much of what Jesus had taught them over the past forty-two months was using physical examples to illustrate spiritual truths. Apparently, they could not bring themselves to believe that this time Jesus was speaking about a literal, physical event. Jesus told them several specific things that

would happen. First, He would be delivered to (or betrayed to) the chief priests and scribes. They may have thought that someone would just tell the chief priest that the common people were saying Jesus was the Messiah and that He had made no attempt to correct the claim. Maybe this is what they thought the “betrayal” was about.

The second thing that was to happen was that they would condemn Him to death and hand Him over to the Gentiles who would abuse and kill Him because He was thought to be the Messiah. Can you imagine what would happen today if such a claim were made about someone? They may have thought the Jewish leaders and the Romans would ridicule the idea among all the people (Jesus would be mocked) and would assassinate his character in an effort to “cancel” His influence. Sometime later, things would get better and his popularity would “rise again” and He would be accepted by the rulers and be given a great position. Apparently, they simply did not believe Jesus was speaking literally.

Jesus gave them additional information that had not been shared before. This was the first time He mentioned that He would be handed over to the Gentiles. According to Matthew’s account, Jesus said that His death would be by crucifixion. Although the disciples may not have realized what was happening, Jesus did realize it and He pressed on, voluntarily.

Request Made – 10:35-40

³⁵ And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶ And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” ³⁷ And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸ Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” ³⁹ And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” Mark 10:35-40 (ESV)

Our first impression of the first request that James and John made is that they were trying to get Jesus to commit to something without telling Him the details. This probably was not that as much as it was related to something Jesus said about “whatsoever you ask for, believing, you shall receive.” They may have been thinking that their request was being made in the spirit of “ask, believe, receive.”

The specific request was related to when Christ would be “in His glory.” They wanted to be positioned on either side of Him, one on the right and the other on the left. The picture that comes to mind for most of us is that of Christ in all his regal attire sitting on His throne as we might associate with the visions John had that were recorded in the Revelation about Heaven. That was likely the same imagery that James and John were thinking about. They were likely thinking that God’s kingdom was about to be restored to Israel when Jesus returned to Jerusalem. Apparently, some (like Judas Iscariot) thought that if Jesus was physically arrested that it would force His hand and the Roman domination would be miraculously overthrown by the angel armies that Christ would summons on His behalf. As we know, that sequence did not happen.

Jesus’ response was “You do not know what you are asking for.” It seems that Jesus was saying to them that they were thinking in worldly values with regard to the upcoming events rather than Kingdom-of-God values. As we can discover from God’s word, God’s values and methods are practically opposite of those of the world. For example, Paul was told that God’s strength was made perfect (or accomplished) in weakness. Of course, we recognize “weakness” as the opposite of “strength” or power. In a parallel way, we could argue that God’s glory is not made perfect (accomplished) in a regal and pompous way, but in shame which is the opposite of glory. With that counterintuitive thinking in mind, when was Christ glorified? The most shameful time was on the Cross.

If the Cross was the high point of Christ's glory, then those on His right and His left were the two thieves and not James and John. These two thieves were representatives of all sinful humanity. One was a bad sinner and the other was a good sinner. As such they represented all of humanity – some good and some bad, but all sinners nevertheless, and all finding themselves commended to death since “the wages of sin is death” and “all have sinned.” In their association of “dying with Christ,” we find one who rejected Jesus as God's Messiah and provision for salvation. He died without hope. The other man who believed and accepted Jesus as the Savior also died, but he had the promise of being in Paradise following physical death.

We should not be too quick to criticize what James and John did. Many times our prayers and requests to God sound very much as this request. The major discovery in this passage is not the fact that James and John wanted to be great, but it is the revelation by Jesus that there is a price to pay. Surely, we want to be successful, however, there are some searching questions we must ask ourselves regarding success.

These questions focus on our willingness to be involved, the skill or ability that can be developed and what God has intended. Stated another way, we should ask “are we willing to pay the price?” Even more important, “are we able to pay the price?” We should also ask “is this what God has planned for my life?” We may not want to accept that certain things are ordained by God and that we may never achieve a particular position or goal in life.

Willingness: Many times we want the fruit of success without the plowing, sowing, watering, cultivating and caring it takes. One problem most of us have is that we do not realize that it takes time to develop necessary skills and it takes effort. Van Cliburn, the great pianist, was once greeted by a woman who said, “Oh, Mr. Cliburn, I would give anything to be able to play as you play.” His reply was rather pointed. He said “No you wouldn't. If you would give anything, then you would practice eight hours a day for twenty years and then you could play as I play.”

Paul tells that the request of James and John is not far from what God wants for each of us. “We have been made to sit in heavenly places with Christ Jesus.” Is Jesus asking each of us “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? Are you willing to follow my example? Are you willing to freely lay your all on the altar?” When Jesus said in John 14:6 “I am the way” He was saying that we must follow His example and walk as He walked. Sometimes we tend to think that Jesus being “the Way” means that He has paid the price for our redemption and that we avail ourselves of that salvation by believing. That is true, however, we must never think that “believing” is simply “mental acceptance” when it actually means laying it all on the altar in the same “Way” that Jesus did.

Ability: We can't be sure James and John knew what was involved when they answered Jesus, “Oh, yes, we can do it.” Often, we think we can do anything and usually that is the time when we are most vulnerable. Paul warned us, “Let he who stands (or thinks he does) take heed, lest he fall.” We must realize that without the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we will fail in the most important arenas of life: our relationship with God and our relationship with people.

Another view of their seemingly rash response is that they were relying on the strength that God would provide to those who put their trust in Him. As it turned out, they did experience suffering and eventual death for the cause of Christ because they trusted in Him.

Election: God has plans for our lives and it may be that we won't ever be the president of the United States, or even the mayor of our town. The thing that each of us needs to do is to be successful in whatever God calls us to do. We do not need to worry about some responsibility He has not given to us.

Roles Reversed – 10:41-45

⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. ⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:41–45 (ESV)

How did the other disciples react to James and John? Predictably! They were probably disappointed that they had not thought of it first.

Notice that Jesus specifically warned about **not** following the way of the world in how we define greatness or success and we certainly should not use the ways of the world in the manner we conduct ourselves. Jesus mentioned two degrees of accomplishment. The first area is being “great” and the second is being “chief.” In today’s way of expressing things, we might describe these as being “important” and being “the leader.”

The way to achieving “importance or greatness” is to be a servant. The Greek word used there is *diakonos* and means “one who executes the commands of another, especially of a master.” Of course, this could also be called a minister or a steward. On the other hand, if one would desire to be chief or the leader, then a greater commitment is involved. Rather than just being a minister, the route is that of being a “bond slave.” The Greek word used here is *doulos* and means “a slave, bondman, man of servile condition.” Strong’s concordance also says that the word is related to “a person who gives himself up and is devoted to another with no regard of his own interests.”

This commitment and result are seen in verse 45 where Jesus spoke about His own mission. He came not to be served but to serve AND to **give** His life a ransom for many. The Greek word for “give” is *didomi* and means to *give something to someone of one's own accord*. Notice the similarity in this meaning and that of a description of a bond slave — “one who gives himself up.”

Jesus is recognized as being **great** by the ministry He delivered to people in healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons, and feeding the hungry. However, it was in His demonstration of being a bond slave that He is recognized as **Chief** — number one. We see the behavior of a slave in Jesus as He gave Himself up in His death on the Cross. It is in this atoning work of His death, burial and resurrection that He proved that He is the Worthy Lamb, the Anointed One of God, the Son of God.

When you think about it, the way that Jesus showed us is not limited to the operation of the church. It works in every area of life. The only route to true greatness is through sacrifice. This is the example Jesus showed us on the cross. He gave His life as a ransom for many. He redeemed us from slavery to sin and the slavery of sin. In giving Himself up, even to death, He confirmed He is Lord of all. He achieved greatness beyond description and we have greatness opened up to us since we can achieve the potential that God has for us in Christ Jesus by following the example and walking in the way of Jesus.

I think it is safe to say that Jesus wants what is best for us. He wants us to be successful; however, we cannot obtain true greatness by using the world’s methods to achieve our goals. The prescription for greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven is through ministry and service.