

Today we hear about two of Jesus' disciples who were interested in securing promotions for themselves. Jesus is in favor of people seeking high positions in the kingdom of God. However, the means to get there is quite different than the way things work here below.

Wanting to climb the corporate ladder is normal fare for us hard-working Americans. We applaud those who start in the mail room, work their way up to clerk, then upward to assistant vice president and so on. Here, James and John are looking to jump right to the top positions – vice president or, in Middle Eastern lingo, Grand Vizier.

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.” Mark 10:35

Here they wanted to pre-qualify their request. We all did this at least when we were children and wanted a cookie before supper. We asked, “Mommy, say yes when I ask you this question.” Nice try! The sons of thunder here try to play it the same way.

And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” Mark 10:36

Of course, Jesus knew exactly what they were going to ask. Rather than immediately correct them, Jesus lets them put all their cards out on the table. He will reshuffle them later, but by letting them speak they can reveal what is in their hearts.

And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Mark 10:37

Well, that isn't asking for much, is it? Looking at the background of this request, we learn it was actually their mother's idea for them to ask this favor. Good ol' mom, always looking out for what's best for her boys. When you ask most people about heaven, they aren't concern too much about how much gold and diamonds they will wearing or the size of their condo. People's biggest concern is just getting there. Rank and position among the saints? No matter. Not so with James and John. They ask for the top seats next to the high king.

All things considered, this was not that outlandish of a request. After all, didn't these two brothers along with Simon Peter make up Jesus' inner circle? They were the ones Jesus took with him on critical missions and who he had small group discussions with. They were with Jesus when he was transfigured. They were right by Jesus when he prayed in Gethsemane the night he was arrested. They witness things the other disciples were not invited to see. Who would be more natural for Jesus to have as his right- and left-hand men? Add to all that the truth that Jesus, James and John were family. At the beginning it said Zebedee was the father of James and John. Do you remember who their mother was? Salome. Salome was the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. That means Jesus, James, and John were cousins. What's a little

nepotism among friends? So, you can see why their request for the top posts did make some sense. Let's continue.

Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking." Mark 10:38

And of course, Jesus was right. They had in mind a political kingdom with a government based here on earth running according to earthly ideas and earthly ways. So, Jesus says they are wrong in that regard. They really still have no idea whatsoever about the true nature of Jesus' kingdom. Did not Jesus once say that his kingdom is not of this world? Being not of this world, it operates in an entirely different manner. Notably that, before any glory or high positions are given, there must come much suffering and sacrifice. So, Jesus continues.

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Mark 10:38

"Cup" and "baptism" are terms used in Scripture that sometimes mean suffering. This is the sense Jesus uses those terms here. What do James and John have to say?

And they said to him, "We are able." Mark 10:39

Of course, they think they are able, because they have no idea what Jesus is taking about. Someone might say, "I'd like to run a marathon." You say, "That will take a lot of training." They say, "Oh, that's no problem!" They don't realize the size of the undertaking. Same here with James and John.

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,..." Mark 10:39

Jesus indicates that, yes, James and John will suffer for the kingdom. Indeed they did. King Herod killed James with the sword not long after the post-Pentecost church got going. John was the only disciple at the foot of the cross, knowing first-hand that agony and sorrow. He was later exiled to the island of Patmos where he wrote the book of Revelation. He was not martyred like the others but outlived everyone else and longed their absence for many years.

"...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 10:40

Now there is a vague answer! Who will sit at Jesus' left and right? Who has been doing the preparing for those spots? Our default answer is the Father. Jesus is equal to the Father in the Trinity, however, Jesus voluntarily defers these kinds of things to his father, as should we.

And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. Mark 10:41

It turns out James and John weren't only ones with their sites on positions of power. If the other ten disciples also thought James and John were the obvious choices to sit next to Jesus in glory, they would not have been indignant. They were guilty of the same false, vain ambition for power, wealth, and glory. They were all true to our corrupted human nature. Time for Jesus to do some straightening out here with the twelve. They need to learn some important things.

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. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. Mark 10:42-44

Ok so here Jesus does what he does best – he takes what we see as normal and ordinary and turns it on its head. So often, Jesus shows us that things are so often the reverse of what we think. Here, if you want to be at the top, you first need to go to the bottom. If you want the highest position in God's kingdom, you need to occupy the least, spiritually speaking. That means you dedicate your entire life not only to your own interests, but to the needs of others. In my observation, people are all for this idea. They say, "Oh, so-and-so is such a wonderful fellow. He would give you the shirt off his back, and throw in the buttons, too. More people should be like that." But as for their own lives, forget about it. "I am not called to such a life of service." Well, yes we are! Jesus makes his point in the next verse.

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 10:45

If there's one thing you have to appreciate about Jesus, it's that he does lead by example. He never asks us to do anything that he himself did not do. He tells us to be a light in the world. He is the light of the world. He tells us to be peacemakers. He made peace between God and all people. He tells us to obey the commandments. He kept them perfectly. He tells us to have faith. He is the object of our faith. He tells us to take up our cross of suffering and service. He took up his cross and died for us all. You have to appreciate that about Jesus.

When James and John ask Jesus for the top seats next to him in power, Jesus doesn't not dismiss their request out of hand. He does not send them packing, He does not do one of those "Get behind me Satan!" lines. At least James and John WERE looking for a new kingdom. They did have enough faith that Jesus was going to establish a kingdom and they wanted to be an important part of it. They had faith. The problem was not a lack of belief. The problem was a lack of understanding about the nature of the kingdom Jesus was bringing.

If we want to get a better idea of the nature of Jesus' kingdom, we need look no farther than Calvary. Jesus was coronated with a crown of thorns and a sign above him that declared him to be Jesus of Nazareth, king of Jews. This was Jesus putting his words into action. He put himself in the role of the servant for all mankind. Who occupied the positions to his right and to his left? It wasn't James and John. Rather, two thieves were given those spots on either side of the coronated Lord. I highly doubt they are the ones for whom the positions at Jesus' left and right

in glory have been prepared. Yet here is the image given for us to think about if we want to reign with Christ. Like James and John, it is good for us to desire positions in Jesus' kingdom. Like them, it is also necessary for us to know what we are in for, as many times Jesus told that if we want to follow him into glory, first we take up our cross and follow him.

In Jesus' death, our rightful positions are as servants of God who serve our neighbors. We help them according to their need, whether material, emotional, or spiritual. Jesus has also made us priests of God whose duty it is to intercede on behalf of family, friends, the church and the world. What better way to serve our neighbor than to call upon the help of the Lord and plead their case? As we serve others in the power of the Spirit, we do so with the fruits of the Spirit - patience, kindness and in goodness.

We may not be relatives of the Lord according to his earthly line like James and John, but it is still good for us to seek to be seated with Christ in glory. He says the way to do that is to willingly accept the suffering we must bear for the name and to take on the role of the servant of all. We cannot do this without the Lord's help, and a lot of it. Therefore, God grant you his spirit and blessing that he may complete the good work that he has begun in you. Amen

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