

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

By Steve Zeisler

The text for this message begins at 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.

Some background will be helpful to set the scene. The events of this passage took place near the end of Jesus' life. Jerusalem was the city of God, a royal city where Messiah was to claim David's throne. Jesus had been to Jerusalem many times, but on this journey, he was entering the city as a king leading his subjects.

As royal processions go, however, this was an unusual one. There was no army. The followers were few, and they were neither wealthy nor important. Of course, Jesus was an unusual king. Angelic choirs heralded his birth, but, with the exception of a few shepherds and some wise men from the far east, his birth went virtually unnoticed on earth. His life and ministry fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, though there was little recognition of this until after his resurrection. And, though they did not fully understand who he was, and were often frightened by circumstances that surrounded him, Jesus' disciples continued to follow him on this journey to Jerusalem.

Continuing in the text, we read:

Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

What terrible expectations! One who loved him would betray him. Leaders of his own people would condemn him. He would be given over to the hated (Gentile) Romans to be humiliated and killed. He would endure these things and then rise again.

Jesus was certainly courageous enough to face martyrdom by himself. He could have told his followers, "I am going to lose my life, but I love you too much to put you through what lies ahead." He could have tried to soften the blow, but he didn't. Instead, he expected them to travel with him to the cross. Jesus knew that his cross was their only hope.

Now continuing from verse 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.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

“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?”

“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, 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.”

James and John, whom Jesus had nicknamed “Sons of Thunder,” had been disciples of John the Baptist. They heard John declare Jesus to be the promised one sent by God. They had been present with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and heard a voice from heaven say, “this is my Son.” Their love for Christ was deep, but, as it is with most of us, their love contained self-serving motives. They hoped Jesus would claim his throne and elevate his loyal followers.

Matthew 20:20 tells us that it was the mother of James and John who first asked Jesus to allow her sons to sit beside him in his kingdom. But Jesus, even according to Matthew, did not address her. He spoke directly to James and John, clearly aware that they were the ones who desired the benefit of special status. The fact that they sent their mother, and that the issue aroused jealousy in the other ten, points to the self-serving quality of their request. They desired a position that would place them above the others.

These Sons of Thunder had mixed motives. They wanted personal advantage, but they were also willing to face danger because of their love for Jesus. They fully expected that God would give him the throne of David and that there would be a glorious outcome to his mission. Their request is based as much on faith as it is on self-centeredness.

Shortly before this incident, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, 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.” (Matthew 19:28) Jesus was a poor Galilean heading into terrible times, but his followers believed in his future victory and wanted to be included when he came into his glory.

It is significant that the Lord showed no hint of condemnation, either of James and John for their self-seeking attitude or of the other ten for their jealousy. Their desire was simply that they might be great someday. “Lord, I want to join you in your victory and be with you in your glory. I want significance that outshines every other hope for significance that I have ever had. I want to know joy and love. I want to be the person I was intended to be. I was made in the image of God, and I am destined for greatness.”

Too many of us never ask to be great. We see ourselves through a lens of failure and inadequacy. We don't even know how to imagine ourselves being worthy of the love of God, of being at his side and hearing him say, "Well done." James 4:2 says we don't have because we don't ask. What do you want Jesus to do for you? He never turns aside those who ask to be made great.

Jesus fully intends to make us great, but the means for achieving greatness is not what we expect. The only way to greatness is by his cross. To become who he intends us to be, we must join him in the execution of our sinful nature.

Jesus asked, "Can you undergo my baptism?" To Christians, baptism is a religious word, but in Jesus' time, baptism was an ordinary word that meant to place one thing into another thing. Shipbuilders used the word baptism when they placed a ship into the ocean after building it in dry-dock. In many cases the word means to be submerged or drowned. Jesus was asking his followers, "Can you be drowned as I will be? Are you willing to lose your life to gain it?"

There was a time when the apostle Paul thought he could fix himself, clean what was unclean, make himself worthwhile. He knew the law. He thought he could perform well enough. Eventually he realized his need, and he cried out in desperation for help. We can read his words in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Jesus says to his disciples, "I intend for you to be even greater than you long to be, but the way to greatness is the cross."

Now look at the final section of our passage, beginning at verse 41:

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 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. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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."

We are told that the ten became indignant with James and John. The reason they became indignant is not because they were offended by the audacity of the request but because they didn't think of it first. Each of the ten wanted to be on Jesus' right or left hand, but James and John managed to get to Jesus first and make the request. The ten became angry, so Jesus called together all twelve of his followers. Again, he didn't condemn what they asked for, but he did correct their understanding of it. "You don't know what you are asking, but I am going to tell you. The way to attain what you desire is through my baptism."

Jesus' followers didn't understand what greatness was. They didn't know what it looked like or how to measure it. Because they didn't know how to recognize true greatness, they would choose the wrong things in trying to pursue it, so Jesus explained it to them by drawing a contrast. "The Gentiles lord it over those in their charge." The word Gentiles in this text means unbelievers. Sometimes the New Testament uses the word Gentile to mean those who do not believe God, as opposed to Jews who do believe God. That is the distinction that Jesus makes: those in the world who do not believe God lord it over one another. They measure greatness by the distance between them and their subordinates, by the number of people they can command and control

and dominate. They measure greatness by their ability to affect outcomes in the short term. The kind of leadership that should happen in the Church, among believers, is not the kind that happens everywhere else in the world. People of God in a community of faith don't use the methods of the world. We don't dominate, demand, threaten, and measure the distance between those who are great and those who are not. We don't use perks, titles, and special advantages to define who is significant. We don't peddle influence or punish the weak and reward the strong. It is very interesting how Jesus words this. "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them." He doesn't bother to argue the opposite point. He just says "not so among you." Whatever is true in the world, not so among you. If you want to recognize greatness as it really exists, if you want to be someone whose significance grows out of the real presence of God in your life, you must not believe what the world believes about greatness. In fact, whoever wants to be great among you must be a servant. Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve.

This passage does not teach that living in the world is wrong. There is nothing wrong with Bible scholars using computers or Christians building modern hospitals or means of transportation and communication. Modern media can be used for God. The worldliness that is being condemned here is competitiveness, self-promotion, manipulation, looking down upon others—that is wrong. Instead, if we want to be great, we must be servants. Those who are greatest are those who are fully, frequently, and profoundly learning how to forget themselves and to find others they can help. Those who are great do not ask, "What's in it for me?" They do not seek to spread their name or reputation. Those who are great look for ways of giving themselves away and blessing others. If you want to recognize greatness in the world, you will look for those who serve others. If you want to be great—and you should, because you were made for greatness—the way to greatness is through the cross, through crucifying what is unholy, ungodly, and selfish.

Do you want to be great? You should, because you were made for greatness. Jesus asked his disciples, "What do you want me to do for you?" He asks us the same question today.

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