



-- Read Mark 10:35-45.

-- Pray.

-- **Video – “Me Church”**

Some of you may recall that I showed that video to you several years ago. However, I wanted to play it again this morning because it reminds me so much of the attitude we see in brothers James and John in our text this morning. They are the sons of Zebedee, also known as the “Sons of Thunder.” Read again with me their request of Jesus in verses 35-37, and see if you don’t hear a little bit of “Me Church” coming from them.

We read, *“Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask.’* (That sounds like “Me Church,” doesn’t it? It also sounds a whole lot like the “Name-It-Claim-It” Prosperity Gospel peddlers). So in verse 36, Jesus plays along: *‘What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked.”* And in verse 37, they reply, *“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”*

Notice that rather than asking Jesus what He, as their teacher and Lord, would request of them, they approach Him with plans to procure from Him the chief item on their wish lists. And theirs is no small request, for what they want is to be promised the highest possible rank in Christ’s coming kingdom.

Our Lord’s response to their audacious request comes in verse 38, where He says, *“You don’t know what you are asking.”* Or, in other words, He is saying something like, “I love you boys, but you don’t have a clue what you’re doing.”

They wanted greatness, but Jesus is about to show them that they had totally misconstrued what true greatness is or how one ought to pursue it. In fact, their struggle to understand the true nature of greatness very much resembles our struggle to do the same today. Thus, I pray we will prayerfully consider at least two vital observations about true greatness that emerge from these verses. The first is this:

1.) True greatness is bigger than we expect.

So why exactly does Jesus tell James and John that they do not know what they are asking? Why is it that their attempt to gain greatness is so misguided?

The first reason is the basic fact that the exalted positions which James and John are seeking are positions of their own making, not God's. That is, as these brothers ask Jesus to place them at His right and left when He comes into His glory, they have a severely mistaken understanding of what His glory will be. As did all of Israel at this time, they thought that the Messiah would be a political conqueror who would defeat Rome and rule in Jerusalem on the throne of David. What James and John wanted, then, was to have the highest possible rank in this new government of which Jesus would rule as king. However, the kind of political kingdom on earth that James and John imagined as Christ's "glory" is simply not the kind of kingdom that Jesus came to establish. Rather, Jesus came to claim for Himself a ransomed bride—the church—who will be united to Him forever in a new heavens and a new earth.

So this, I think, is at least one reason why Jesus responds to the brothers' request by saying, "*You do not know what you are asking.*" Think about it: The brothers were asking for glory in a kingdom of their own imagination—a kingdom far less glorious than the actual kingdom Christ came to win. As they approached Christ with their request, they failed to realize that the glory the Father had already planned for them as believers in His Son was far greater than the lesser glory they were seeking.

These brothers merely wanted authority in a new government in Jerusalem at the right and left hands of Christ. God, on the other hand, intends to unite all believers forever with Christ as His beautiful, beloved bride. Far better than being beside Him, God is making us one with Him. Better than right or left, God promises us eternal oneness with His Son.

And so, Jesus informs James and John that they have no idea what they are asking. These brothers were, at the same time, asking for far too much and far too little. They were asking far too much in the sense that they were wildly presumptuous to imagine that helpless sinners could request such exaltation from God. Yet, at the same time, they were asking for far too little because, unbeknownst to them, God had already purposed to give them a glory far greater than that which they thought they wanted. Whereas they wanted political power

and prestige on earth, God planned to grant them perfect righteousness, power, love, hope, peace, and joy in eternal union with Christ.

And so it is and will be for you and me. Our best imaginations of what we think we want for ourselves will prove infinitely smaller than that which God offers us freely in Christ. Yet, like James and John, we are so very prone to lust after lesser things. We pine for power while God puts forth peace... We want fame while He offers faith... We seek to be served while God summons us to the joy of serving others. Just like these foolhardy brothers, instead of coming to God on His terms and receiving in the immeasurable inheritance He offers us in Christ, we somehow think we are better off coming to Him on our own terms, seeking with all our hearts what we won't even want in the end.

The point, then, is this: We limit what God can do in us and through us when we operate out of our own conception of greatness. If we would know God's glory and if we would live for that which is truly great, then we must trust in Him to define greatness and seek His kingdom on His terms, not our own.

...because the terms of God's kingdom are not like those of this world. Indeed, the second truth about true greatness that we are blessed to see in our text is this...

2.) True greatness is different than we expect.

Okay, now that we have examined the brothers' foolish question, let us now focus on our Lord's response, because Jesus uses this opportunity to direct their hearts and ours to God's truth about greatness and glory. So in the second half of verse 38, He asks them, "*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*" This cryptic question is Jesus' way of pointing forward to the brutal death He will soon die as a ransom for undeserving sinners, bearing the full weight of God's wrath against sin.

And in a rather foolhardy response, James and John answer in verse 39, "*We are able.*" And I think they can honestly answer this way at this point simply because they don't know what they are talking about. As we just mentioned, they think that Jesus is speaking of a valiant military conquest, and these "Sons of Thunder" are all too ready and willing for that. But Jesus is saying something substantially different. He is telling them that the glory they were seeking is not about having power over people, but about giving oneself entirely in sacrificial service for the glory of God. He is telling them that, if they really want greatness that will stand the test of eternity, then they need to humble themselves and sacrifice every selfish ambition in order to serve and bless others. And He conveys this in a question, asking in verse 39, "*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*"

So, even though James and John say that they *are* able to do this in verse 39, they most certainly are not, because the cup and baptism of which He speaks here are utterly unique to Him. Yet, if that is the case, then why does Jesus say at the end of verse 39, *“The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized.”* Well, James and John, much like you and me, would indeed drink the cup of Christ and be baptized with His baptism, but not because they were able to become an atoning sacrifice for sinners or satisfy the wrath of God against sin. Jesus alone can drink that cup and bear that baptism. However, by faith in Christ, every believer is united as one with Christ and thereby participates fully in the accomplishments of Christ. In other words, all that Christ has accomplished is accorded to us, not by our works, but because we are made one with Him by faith.

So here is the point (and please hear this): It is sinfully presumptuous for us to ask God to exalt us above other believers for at least three reasons. The first is that the very desire for such special recognition is an insult to God who, by faith in Christ, has already promised us a glory far superior than anything we could even think to ask for on our own. He has promised us the infinite glory and exaltation of eternal union with His Son. It is like a slap in the face to God to ask Him for more than that unbelievable gift!

The second reason why it is sheer presumption to ask for special exaltation from God is revealed in verse 40, where Jesus says, *“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.”* In other words, everything and everyone is subject to the sovereign rule of our Heavenly Father, even the Jesus. Though Christ is fully God, Scripture makes clear that among the Godhead, the Father has supreme authority. Thus, Jesus will not grant the exalted positions that James and John were seeking because such positions of honor have long since been chosen and appointed by the Father.

Third, we should never seek exaltation over other believers because, in God’s economy, the very desire to be exalted above others is also exactly counterproductive. In other words, choosing for yourself the best seat at the table is the quickest way to lose it. In fact, Jesus uses a parable to teach this very truth in Luke 14:7-11, where He says: *“When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ‘When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this man your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

To understand God's kingdom, then, is to know that the one who seeks his own glory will only be humbled. On the contrary, the one who truly humbles himself before others is the one whom God will choose to exalt in the end. Thus, a search for the believer whom God will exalt most highly, should begin among the most faithful and unassuming servants among us.

Let us get back to our text now in verse 41. Here the other disciples become indignant with James and John—probably because they wish they had thought to make the same request first. Then, beginning in verse 42, the words of Jesus turn our attention directly to a right consideration of true meaning of greatness in the kingdom of God. In verses 42 through 44, He rebukes the imperial attitude seen in James and John. We read, *“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, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant.’”* Very clearly here, Jesus is pronouncing that true greatness is simply not what the world says it is. It is not about popularity or power or authority over others, like the world around us believes. Rather, it is about a life of humble service to others for the glory of God.

And in verse 45, Jesus puts an emphatic stamp upon the truth about greatness, declaring this about Himself: *“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* To eliminate any doubt about the nature of real glory, Jesus culminates this conversation by pointing to Himself. We know that there will not and cannot ever be anyone superior to Jesus Christ—the eternal Son of God who became man for our salvation. And His greatness, He says, is seen in His humble attitude of service and self-sacrifice. Listen to the Apostle Paul's beautiful declaration of this truth in Phil. 2:5-11, where he writes:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Notice the progression of this outstanding Scripture passage: Paul says that, in obedience to the Father, Jesus humbled himself all the way to the point of death on a cross. Therefore, because of this supremely humble act of service to others, the

Father has exalted Jesus to the highest possible place, and He has given Him the highest possible name forever and ever, such that everyone, everywhere, from every age will eternally acknowledge Jesus as the absolute greatest of all time (not Mohammed Ali). Therefore, as Paul says at the beginning of that passage, “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*” Thus, as Paul says at the beginning of that text, if we would achieve true greatness in this life, then we must have the same attitude of servanthood that Christ has modeled for us in gladly giving His life for helpless and undeserving sinners.

The upshot of all of these verses is this: To understand what really matters in life is to serve others like Jesus did. Simply put, those who *get* God’s kingdom will *grow* a servant’s heart. Conversely, people who are not actively and lovingly serving others by God’s power and for His glory should not claim to be living for God’s kingdom. The contradiction in that case is simply too severe. Therefore—and please hear this—if serving in and through the church is not a chief priority of your life, then you are necessarily missing God’s call to you in Christ.

Indeed, I think it is more than fair to say that the believer who does not live a servant’s life has succumbed to the lies of the world. Satan, you see, badly wants you and me to indulge in a self-centered life because self-centeredness is a wicked scheme of the devil. It lies to us by telling us that getting the most out of life means living in our own little worlds and serving ourselves above all. While this mentality may at times seem useful in the short term, it can only bring disgrace in the end. A self-important, self-absorbed life simply cannot be the life of Christ for, as Jesus declares in Mark 8:34-35, “*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.*”

So the question to us this morning is this: *Will we sincerely pursue true greatness as people who call upon Jesus Christ as Lord?* For the glory God would have us seek is far different than we might expect. It is not about popularity or power... It’s not about fashion or fame... It’s not about trophies or treasure. Rather, to demonstrate the greatness and glory of God, we must give our lives in humble service to one another and to a lost and watching world. *So, do we really want for ourselves what God wants of us and for us? Do we really believe what God says about greatness, or do we think our ideas about it make more sense?* One thing is for sure: Our response to these questions will be seen in our service, or in the lack thereof.

Let me conclude, then, by presenting you with a few opportunities to put feet to what we have heard from God’s Word this morning. A few people have been

asking over the past few weeks why we bother to host a Back 2 School Block Party every year. This passage is one big reason why! We invite the community so that we might serve the community. How will the watching world know that people who love Christ serve others with joy? They will know when they see us serving them with gladness in our hearts and in our expressions, and in our hospitality. This is at least one purpose of the B2SBP. While this event is certainly not the only way to serve and while it may not even be the best way, it is, nonetheless, a very visible way to show our community that God's people are servants.

-- My Hope with Billy Graham – A blessed opportunity to serve the Lord by sharing the Gospel.

-- Ministry Opportunities Checklists.

“Me Church,” it seems, is everywhere today; but “Me Church” is not Christ's church. Whereas “Me Church,” reflects the culture, Christ's church ought to resemble Christ Himself, who “*came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” Let us do what is great in God's sight. Let us live—and I mean really live—for the honor and glory of Christ! Let us get busy serving Him by serving others in His church and through His church!