

Sermon for October 20, 2024 – 22nd Sunday in Pentecost

Mark 10:35-45 EHV

Theme: Godly Greatness . . .

- 1) Is not found in selfish ambition,
- 2) But in serving others as Jesus served us.

³⁵*James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached him and said, “Teacher, we wish that you would do for us whatever we ask.”*

³⁶*He said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?”*

³⁷*They said to him, “Promise that we may sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory.”*

³⁸*But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with?”*

³⁹*“We can,” they replied.*

Jesus told them, “You will drink the cup that I am going to drink and be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with. ⁴⁰But to sit at my right or at my left is not for me to give; rather, these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

⁴¹*When the ten heard this, they were angry with James and John.*

⁴²*Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³But that is not the way it is to be among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Have you ever heard of selective hearing? It’s only paying attention to the things you want to hear and ignoring the rest. For example, a mother might tell her child: “You can watch TV after you do your homework,” only later to find her child watching TV with unfinished homework. When confronting the child as to why she was watching TV with unfinished homework, the child says, “But Mom, you said I could watch TV.”

Everyone tends to selectively hear what they want to hear instead of what is said. For example, how often don’t we think about our response to a person who is still talking to us instead of listening to what they are saying? Then, when we respond, the other person informs us that we missed his point completely!

The disciples also had this problem. They heard Jesus talk about His coming kingdom and imagined all the glory that would come with it. But they didn’t take to heart what he said about the need for His suffering, death, and resurrection to establish His kingdom. The first time Jesus instructed the disciples about those things, Peter tried to rebuke Him. The second time Jesus spoke about them, His disciples argued who was the greatest in His kingdom.

Our sermon text follows the third time Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for his impending suffering, death, and resurrection. How did James and John react? Together with their mother, they asked Jesus for a position of greatness. Jesus, therefore, used their request to teach all his

disciples **wherein Godly greatness is found**: 1) not in selfish ambition, but 2) in serving others as the Lord himself served us.

Part One: Godly greatness is not found in selfish ambition.

Our text begins: ³⁵*James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached [Jesus] and said, "Teacher, we wish that you would do for us whatever we ask."*

The disciples' question reminds me of how a child might ask his parent for something to which he thinks they may not want to agree. "Mommy and Daddy, promise me you will say yes to my question." Only a fool would do that.

But as childish as the disciples' request was, it also demonstrated faith. Jesus taught us that we can ask him for anything. James and John believed His promise, and that's commendable. What's not commendable is their selfish reason for making the request.

And yet, how often aren't we like these two disciples? We can easily ask God for things we really want. That's not wrong because God invites us to ask him for anything. But the problem is that many of our requests have selfish motives behind them.ⁱ Still worse, we often fail to ask for the great things that God wants to give us, like the Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱ

³⁶*He said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?"* ³⁷*They said to him, "Promise that we may sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory."*

Ah, yes, the disciple's selective hearing rears its ugly head again! They remembered Jesus telling them on another occasion: *"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."*ⁱⁱⁱ But they focused only on that part and ignored His words about His suffering, death, and resurrection. In their quest for positions of everlasting prestige for themselves, they showed little understanding or care for what Jesus was really trying to teach them.

Surprisingly, Jesus didn't rebuke or criticize James and John for their request because it showed their faith in who Jesus was and what he promised. That part was good. But Jesus also doesn't leave them in their simple-mindedness. Instead, he gently guides them back to what he was trying to teach them about his suffering and death.

³⁸*But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with?"*

James and John didn't quite grasp the nature of Christ's glory. He had just explained that his path to glory was filled with suffering, ridicule, beatings, and even death. Suffering was the cup Jesus had to drink, and death was the baptism he had to undergo. He was willing to go through all this for our salvation. Those who wished to share in His glory had to follow their Saviour down this road, just as Jesus told them on another occasion: *"If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."*^{iv}

Jesus talked about his cup of suffering and baptism of death to make his disciples think. Everything he was about to do was for His glory, which was all about mercifully forgiving and serving others. Did the disciples understand that? Their question didn't seem to indicate it.

Therefore, with little thought, James and John replied: ³⁹*"We can."* Jesus told them, *"You will drink the cup that I am going to drink and be baptized with the baptism that I am going to be baptized with."*

Yes, James and John would suffer for the Gospel's sake. King Herod would behead James, making him the first apostle to die as a martyr. Even though John would live to old age, his life wouldn't be easy. He would have to watch persecution break out against the Church and be exiled to the island of Patmos.

However, even though Jesus admitted that they would follow Him in suffering, He added, ⁴⁰*"But to sit at my right or at my left is not for me to give; rather, these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."*

Here is an important point to keep in mind: no one can "earn" a position of honour or greatness in God's kingdom. God gives every job, role, and "rank" only to those He's chosen to give them. And guess what? God makes every choice He makes based on grace, not merit. Therefore, it's wrong for us to covet the positions of honour that God has given someone else. Why? Because Christ's kingdom isn't about the recognition we get for ourselves. It's all about Christ and His glory in saving us.

Let's take a moment to apply this to ourselves. It's easy for us to get upset about James and John's request. The rest of the disciples did, too. And yet, don't we also share their childish desire for glory? We all crave recognition and praise – so much so that we rarely realize when our service for Christ has turned into a service for ourselves: a service to get recognition. When that happens, our service becomes sinful. But Jesus redirects our thinking: He served us, not to get anything for himself, but to save us. Let us, then, respond to his mercy and, in the peace of His forgiveness, serve others as he served us.

Part Two: Godly greatness is serving others as Jesus served us.

⁴¹*"When the ten heard this, they were angry with James and John."* Not because they thought their desire for greatness was wrong but because John and James had asked for it for themselves. They wanted those positions of honour!

That is why ⁴²*Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³But that is not the way it is to be among you."* It seems as if no authority in our sinful world rules the way Christ intends. All lead with selfish motives — trying to gain power or fame for themselves. But that is not what Christ wants His Kingdom to be like. Such ideas of selfish glory and greatness have no place in the Church - especially among its leaders.

“Instead, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave of all.” The greatest person in Christ’s kingdom is not the person being served but the one serving: the one willing to give up his rights to benefit others. Think about what that means because the world teaches you the exact opposite. Greatness is neither found in your popularity nor in your ability to influence people to do what you want. No. Greatness, in God’s eyes, is serving others in love: putting their needs ahead of your own.

Do you want to see the primary example of what Jesus means? Then look no further than Jesus himself, as he says ⁴⁵*“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.”*

I can think of no better commentary on Jesus’ words than what the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians: ³*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility consider one another better than yourselves.* ⁴*Let each of you look carefully not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* ⁵*Indeed, let this attitude be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.* ⁶*Though he was by nature God, he did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed,* ⁷*but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant. When he was born in human likeness, and his appearance was like that of any other man,* ⁸*he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*^v

Jesus is first in God’s Kingdom, but he willingly humbled himself to the lowest position – becoming a slave to God’s law and suffering for the sins of everyone. Why did he do this? Not to gain glory and greatness for himself but out of sheer love for us. He did it to give us a gift that we couldn’t even begin earning: the forgiveness of sins! That is what God the Father considers great, as the apostle Paul explains, “⁹*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰*so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹*and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*”^{vi}

Brothers and sisters in Christ: do you want to be great in the Kingdom of God? Then, *do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit.* Yes, repent of such an attitude, realizing how disgusting it is before God. Then, in the peace of Christ’s mercy that has forgiven all your selfish ambition, *consider one another better than yourselves*^{vii} and submit to one another in reverence for Christ.^{viii} Serve each other in the same way Jesus served you. Do so in the peace of His forgiveness to the glory of his name because it is only in Jesus’ merciful, forgiving love for us that we find true greatness and glory before God. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. James 4:3

ⁱⁱ Cf. Luke 11:13

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 19:28 EHV

^{iv} Mark 8:34 EHV

^v Philippians 2:3-8 EHV

^{vi} Philippians 2:9-11 EHV

^{vii} Philippians 2:3 EHV

^{viii} Cf. Ephesians 5:20 EHV