

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity, October 9, 2022

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 472, 412:1, 421, 398, 659.

Lessons: Isaiah 53:10-12, Philippians 2:1-11, Matthew 20:20-28.

Sermon Text: Mark 10:32-45

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Do you have any dreams of greatness? Isn't it human nature to want to receive honor and to want to be praised? Most people at least want to be thanked for things that they do.

Two of Jesus' apostles approached him asking for great honor. They wanted to sit on thrones right next to Jesus in his kingdom. But Jesus' answer may surprise them.

Jesus had just told his disciples: *"We are going up to Jerusalem, ... 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."* Mark 10:33-34 (NIV) They may have realized that Jesus would die and then be raised to life, but they didn't seem to understand what his kingdom on earth is.

These men come to Jesus hoping, and perhaps expecting that Jesus would grant their request without even hearing it. Today we see

TWO OF JESUS' APOSTLES ASK FOR SPECIAL HONOR IN HIS KINGDOM

1. **The question from James and John.**
2. **We hear Jesus' answer, and**
3. **Jesus deals with the other apostles, who became indignant.**
4. **Lessons for us.**

These two men wanted special honor in Jesus' kingdom. They requested the most honorable and prominent seats. According to Matthew, it was their mother who brought this request to Jesus.

They probably remembered part of Jesus' promise which Matthew records in the previous chapter. At that time, Peter said *"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"* Jesus said to them, *"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. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."* Matthew 19:27-30 (NIV)

They were pretty presumptuous. They asked Jesus to give them what they were about to ask for even before they asked it. They said 'Tell us that you will give us what we want even before we ask.'

They wanted the most honored places in Jesus' kingdom, sitting at his right hand and at his left. It is likely that they didn't really understand what Jesus' kingdom really was. In fact, we are told that just before Jesus ascended into heaven, after being with his disciples on earth for about three years, even then there were disciples who didn't really understand what Jesus' kingdom was. *"They asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'"* Acts 1:6 (NIV)

Jesus doesn't immediately explain to them again that his kingdom is not an earthly kingdom, but that his kingdom is ruling in the hearts of all who believe in him. But he does tell them *"You don't know what you are*

asking” and he replies with a question. *“Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”* He asks if they can suffer as he is going to suffer.

Their reply is a bold ‘Yes’, *“We can”*.

Then *“Jesus said to them, ‘You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with.’”* He tells them ‘You will suffer.’ Scripture later records how true Jesus’ words are. Scripture tells us of the death of James in Acts 12. *“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.”* Acts 12:1-2 (NIV) Scripture does not record the death of the Apostle John, who lived the longest of the apostles, and wrote the book of Revelation about 95 A.D. But we do know that John was exiled to the isle of Patmos where he wrote the book of Revelation.

James and John at this time didn’t understand the suffering of Jesus, and how severe it would be, and probably didn’t fully understand why he had to suffer as he did.

They were seeking glory and honor for themselves and they were not thinking of the glory of the Messiah.

Jesus tells them *“to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”* ‘I can’t give you what you ask. I can’t grant it. My Father in heaven is the one who has control over that.’

Scripture records several times when Jesus’ disciples, even the apostles, were arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. Two chapters earlier, Matthew records that his disciples came and asked him *“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* Matthew 18:1 (NIV) On that occasion, Jesus *“called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”* Matthew 18:2-4 (NIV) Jesus was emphasizing the humility of a little child, and the fact that a little child simply trusts and believes those who take care of him.

But on this occasion, James and John approached Jesus wanting to be recognized as the greatest in Christ’s kingdom.

By this time, Jesus had taught them about the kingdom of heaven, often using parables. But they obviously didn’t understand the nature of Jesus’ kingdom.

When Jesus’ disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest, we may not know exactly what they meant – performing the greatest miracles, being the greatest preacher, being the most important in their master’s eyes or whatever.

At this time James and John were motivated by their desire for their own honor and glory, but they may also have wanted to devote themselves completely to Jesus’ service and thus be rewarded and praised exceptionally highly.

But all such ideas come from our sinful flesh. We all want to be great in some way, great at something. But James and John carried this even further in our text. They wanted to have the greatest seats in Jesus’ kingdom!

Had they forgotten the words from Proverbs? *“Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, ‘Come up here,’ than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.”* Proverbs 25:6-7 (NIV)

The other ten apostles became indignant at their request. Jesus speaks of service as he admonishes them. *“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.’”* In his admonition, he uses the examples of the Gentiles – the Pagans – and their levels of authority and how they regard power and authority. Then he tells them *“Not so with you.”* He emphasizes the importance of service. He came to serve us, and his apostles should serve one another – and all of mankind – as an example for all of Christ’s followers. And we know that their chief service was to give mankind the gospel of salvation.

Because of sinful human nature, there seemed to be competition among Jesus’ Apostles. Perhaps they also each wanted to be of greater service to Jesus. They wanted to be regarded as greater than others. But Jesus had to repeatedly make this point in the Gospels, that those who serve are the greatest. In Mark 9 we read Jesus telling

them: ***“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”*** Mark 9:35 (NIV) In Luke 9 Jesus says ***“he who is least among you all--he is the greatest.”*** Luke 9:48 (NIV)

Scripture even makes an example of the humility of Jesus himself: ***“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!”*** Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)

Humility – real humility – is what Christ is seeking among his followers. His apostles at this time were showing a spirit of competition, not cooperation and humility.

What lessons can we find for ourselves in this history?

We want to avoid pain and suffering, but persecution is inevitable if we are to truly follow Christ. We must realize that suffering for Christ and persecution are inevitable for Christ’s faithful followers.

We are to humbly serve.

We are not to be jealous of others, especially as we seek to serve God.

We should not seek honor for ourselves, as Jesus taught when he was invited to a dinner in Luke 14. ***“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.’”*** Luke 14:7-11 (NIV)

We all want to accomplish something great and to be praised. But none of us dare claim greatness for ourselves in serving God. Praise and honor is God’s to give, not ours to demand from him. We must admit that our pride often puffs us up, and even if we don’t express our desires for honor to other people, we know what is in our hearts. As God’s beloved children, we seek to obey and serve him in any way we can, not serve ourselves.

We are to live and to be regarded as servants, serving God and our fellow man. Each of us may humbly ask God for the benediction ***“Well done, good and faithful servant!”*** Matthew 25:23 (NIV) and rely on his grace in all things. We then must admit that we have only done our duty and gratefully thank him for the crown of life he gives.

Jesus Christ, Son of man and Son of God, came to give his life as a ransom for mankind. So what should we strive after? Why should we not seek praise for being God’s servants? It’s not just coincidence that believers are called “children of God”. May we serve him as faithful servants each day! To him be the glory! Amen.