



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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The World's Greatest Deacon

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If we understand their history—and human nature—we know why they did it. They were part of the inner circle, two of the three within the twelve (Mark 9.2ff.). Their social standing was likely better. Their father had hired servants (Mark 1.20) and at least one of the brothers had some kind of connection with the high priest (John 18.15). They would have shared common ideas about the Messiah, “yearn[ing] for the promised deliverer of the house of David who would free them from the yoke of the hated foreign usurper . . . and would establish His own reign of peace and justice in its place” (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, 8:508). The surprise is not that they would ask such a thing, but that it took them to so long to ask it.

So James and John ask. Or rather demand.

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.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10.35-37).

As he often did, Jesus asked before he answered. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized” (v. 38)? They were sure they were. They knew that to share another’s cup was to share his fate and that to be immersed with another was to be submerged into the same experience. Since they were so sure that Jesus’s fate and experience would be nothing less than glorious, the two would-be cabinet members had no qualms in assuring Jesus that they could, that they did in fact have what it took. Who wouldn’t have said the same?

Jesus knew they would share in his fate, and told them so, along with what such sharing would mean. Places in his kingdom are not about power and exercising authority (v. 42). No, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (vv. 43-44). Such was the way of Jesus 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” (v. 45).

The word “serve” in verse 45 is *diakoneō*. As we have seen, it was a word that stood for the very opposite of what people of that day expected when they thought about success. As did James and John, people then—whether Jew or Greek—saw success in terms of power, prestige, and influence. But Jesus did not just question their views. He turned the precious equilibrium that makes the world work on its head. Real success is measured in terms of menial service, submission to the point of giving up one’s life for others.

It’s really no surprise that *diakonia* is the word that came to be used throughout the New Testament to define Christian ministry, including the word we know as “deacon” (from the cognate *diakonos*). How could a word so closely identified with Jesus be any less important? He is the world’s greatest deacon, the exemplar of true service and therefore of real success. To really follow him is to resist the world’s views and live down to his serving standard.

Unfortunately, it is too easy to be like the other apostles. Hearing of the brothers’ grab for power, “the ten . . . began to be indignant at James and John” (v. 41). Because they had grasped the idea of *diakonia*? Hardly. They were just mad the brothers got there first. And so it often is today. Serving is a needed teaching—when it’s someone else we think needs to serve more. But then Jesus’ words confront us. “Whoever”—that means me as well as you—“*whoever* would be great among you must be your servant, and *whoever* would be first among you must be slave of all.”

Are we willing to share his cup?

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