



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

How to Be Number One

Mark 10.35-45

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Introduction

1. Given their history—and human nature—it's easy to understand why they did it.
 - a. They were part of his inner circle, two of the three within the twelve (Mark 9.2ff.).
 - b. They had social standing: their father had hired servants (Mark 1.20), and at least one of them apparently had connections with the high priest (John 18.15).
 - c. They also believed Jesus was the Messiah for whom their people had waited centuries. Apparently, they shared the messianic views of those who shared a “yearn[ing] for the promised deliverer of the house of David who would free them from the yoke of the hated foreign usurper, would put an end to the impious Roman rule, and would establish His own reign of peace and justice in its place” (*Jewish Encyclopedia* 8:508).
2. So, urged by their mother (Matt 20.20), they made their request; or rather, demanded their position:

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 [δόξ, *dos*; aorist imperative verb] us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10.35-37).
3. They almost certainly did not imagine all that would happen next.
 - a. First, Jesus questioned their commitment (v. 38).
 - b. Then, he spoke to them in cryptic terms about sharing his cup and baptism before telling them he did not have the power to grant their request (vv. 39-40).
 - c. Next, they were met with the indignation of the other ten—not, I suspect, because the ten were less interested in self-promotion, but because James and John had gotten to Jesus first (v. 41).
 - d. Finally, they were challenged to listen to one of the most important lessons Jesus taught (vv. 42-45).
4. If we are serious about following him, we should seek to internalize that lesson.

Body

- I. Success Under Scrutiny.
 - A. James and John asked and reacted as they did, because they doubtless shared a common Jewish view of service (the text's key word is διακονέω [*diakoneō*]).

1. "If service was rendered at all, it was done as an act of social obligation or as an act to those more worthy. A superior would not stoop to become a servant!" (J. Gary Inrig, "Called to Serve: Toward a Philosophy of Ministry," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct-Dec 1983, 337).
 2. "Though Judaism in the time of Jesus knew and practiced its social responsibilities, e.g., to the poor, this was done mainly by alms, not by service (cf. Luke 10:30-35). Lowly service, e.g., waiting at table, was beneath the dignity of a free man (cf. Luke 7:44ff.). Sometimes, the greater would wait at table, but this was unusual" (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [NIDNTT, 1978] 3:545).
- B. The Greek view—which Jesus hinted the brothers shared (v 42)—was essentially the same.
1. "... the Greeks regarded *διακονία* [*diakonia*] as degrading and dishonorable" (Inrig, 336).
 2. "... voluntary giving of oneself in service of one's fellow man is alien to Greek thought. The highest goal before a man was the development of his own personality" (NIDNTT 3:544).
 3. "In Greek eyes, service is not dignified. Ruling and not service is proper to a man. . . . The formula of the sophist, 'How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?' expresses the basic Greek attitude" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [1964], 2:82-83).
- C. Things haven't changed much, have they?
1. Today we see books with titles like *Looking Out for Number One*; *Me*, and *The Virtue of Selfishness*.
 2. Self-fulfillment and self-advancement are major concerns in our culture.
 3. As Chuck Colson once said, "In this culture, personal autonomy is considered life's greatest good. It's the one value that trumps everything else. While we say we love our kids and want what's best for them, too many parents won't let that 'love' get in the way of their personal lifestyle choices, or their self-gratification" (Chuck Colson, "Numbers Don't Lie," Breakpoint Transcript, May 29, 2001).¹
 4. As Inrig observed, "a culture that is focused on self-actualization and self-fulfillment will find little value in servanthood" (Inrig, 336).
- D. It's apparent that, like James and John, we need to learn the nature of true success.
- II. A Problem of Ignorance.
- A. One of the most important statements in our text is in v 38: "You do not know what you are asking. . . ."
- B. Keep in mind that they *thought* they knew (v 39).
1. The references to "cup" and "baptism" are metaphors which essentially mean, "can you share my experience, go through what I am going to go through?"
 2. James and John were confident they could. After all, they were sure that Jesus' experience and fate would be nothing less than glorious.
 3. So, the two would-be cabinet members did not hesitate to assure Jesus that they could, in fact, do what it took. Many other sincere believers would do the same.
- C. What they did not know (but would learn - v 39) was the true nature of that experience.

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1. Only when they understood Jesus' nature and mission would they be able to answer his question (43-45).
2. Don't miss how Jesus' reply would have shocked them.
 - a) As already suggested, the verb, διακονέω (*diakoneō*) referred to menial and mundane activities, tasks lacking apparent dignity (Inrig).
 - b) This is what Jesus said marked his identity and mission.
3. The key to understanding is found in the Son.
 - a) The Son came to serve, and to go all the way with that service (45).
 - b) Note that "life" could well be translated "self" (ψυχή; *psychē*).
 - c) It's important to notice that, while this passage points to his death, it also reminds us that his entire life was committed to διακονέω (*diakoneō*) (see Phil 2.5-8; John 13.2-5; Heb 2.14, 17).
4. It is his example that we are called upon to imitate; it that model that is the mark of true success.

III. A Better Standard of Success.

- A. As we think about our lives in view of Jesus' point in this text, we are led to some ask important questions.
 1. "Do I want to be a success, a real success?" is what most of us ask and try to answer, but it's not the important question.
 2. The proper question is, do we really believe Jesus?
- B. You see, this text becomes a reference point for the entire New Testament.
 1. Its key word, διακονέω, is used in its various forms throughout the New Testament as the definition of Christian ministry, including its use for the word "deacon," where the emphasis is more on service than a position.
 2. The question, then, is whether we want to continue to be tied to the thought patterns and priorities of the world, or servants (διάκονοι, *diakonoi*) like Jesus.

Conclusion

1. We can begin to find the answer by asking how sincerely we sing (or pray) the words to this traditional song: "Lord, make me a servant, Lord, make me like You; for You are a servant, make me one, too. Lord, make me a servant, do what You must do to make me a servant; make me like You" (*Songs of Faith and Praise*, Howard Publishing Company © 1994).
2. That runs against the grain of our nature, our culture, and, if we're honest, much of our lifestyle. But it's the way of Jesus, the way to life.
3. Do we believe him enough to accept it?

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