

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Imitating Greatness

Mark 10:32-45

In today's text, James and John see an opportunity to position themselves for seats on Jesus' Cabinet when he comes into power. "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory" (v. 37). It's a politically savvy move. After all, during the run-up to his inauguration, there will be plenty of individuals jockeying for open positions in the Jesus Administration. So why not get a foot in the door and gain whatever advantage you can? James and John and the other disciples have come this far with Jesus. Surely there's nothing wrong with requesting some governing power in the approaching kingdom of God.

But Jesus rebukes them for their power grab. "You two don't have a clue what you're asking for," says Jesus. If ever there were such a thing as firing a disciple, surely this is the moment when Jesus has every right to do so. He has just finished telling them, for the third time, that he's on his way to Jerusalem, where he'll face betrayal, condemnation, suffering, and death. Then, three days later, he'll rise from the dead. The last thing he needs right now is a pair of followers whose main objective is to climb the ladder of success and make reservations for the best seats at his enthronement.

Maybe James and John were just guilty of selective listening. Maybe all they heard was the part about resurrection, not the part about suffering and death. Maybe they've forgotten the lesson Jesus recently taught them by placing a child before them as the model of true greatness. Maybe they don't recall what he said to them about the first being last and the last first. Whatever is behind James's and John's misunderstanding, their pursuit of prestige and privilege rises to the surface as they try to manipulate Jesus for their own advantage.

What's more, their approach inverts the normal teacher/disciple relationship. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask" (v. 35). It's as if they're asking Jesus to become their servant, rather than living faithfully and obediently under his leadership and instruction.

In that day and time, the teacher/disciple relationship was pretty basic and simple. The disciples were with their teacher, learning to be like their teacher. For Jesus' followers, that meant literally being with him where he was, during the course of the day. With time, the disciples became progressively engaged in doing what he was doing. After a period of learning and training, Jesus sent his disciples to preach and teach and perform amazing deeds.

Once the disciples were engaged in their own missionary activity, it's not as if Jesus stepped back and left them to fend for themselves. He was still with them, evaluating their work and teaching them as they progressed. This continued as they approached Jerusalem, where Jesus would be put on trial and executed. Even as Jesus' suffering and death were getting closer, the teacher/disciple relationship remained the same. It was all about teaching, example, and imitation.

This is part of why Jesus answers James and John's request with a question of his own: Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (v. 38). Jesus uses the images of cup and baptism to point to his own impending suffering. Two weeks ago, we gathered around the waters of baptism, which remind us of our burial, our own death to sin, in order to experience new life in Christ. And last Sunday, we gathered at the Lord's Table, to share the cup, which reminds us of our call to suffer with Christ. Only because Christ himself entered into his suffering and death can we experience salvation. And that salvation involves joining your life to his, by faith, thereby sharing in his suffering and death.

Jesus wants James and John, the other disciples, and all of us who profess to follow him, to know that yes, we can share in his glory. But being with him, and participating in the reign of God, is inseparable from taking up our own crosses and losing our own lives for the sake of the gospel. In his book *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis writes:

Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many admire his miracles, but few follow him in the humiliation of the cross.¹

As Jesus heads toward the cross, he takes his disciples with him. His road must be their road too. His suffering and death aren't theory or speculation, for him or for them. But at this stage, even after a third round of instruction about his impending crucifixion, the disciples still don't grasp what's coming, for Jesus and for themselves. Much of what they need to learn can only be learned by staying with Jesus and watching his way.

That's how a lot of our discipleship takes place. We, like those first followers of Jesus, learn not just by verbal or written instruction but also by imitation. We respond to our risen Lord's call to follow him, and devote ourselves to being with him, through Scripture, prayer, worship, and service. We do these things not only individually but in community with other disciples. And one of the reasons we need this community called the church is to provide us with examples of how to follow Jesus. In other words, we learn the way of Jesus by seeing his way embodied by others. We learn to imitate Jesus by imitating others who are imitating him in their lives.

Theologian and author D. A. Carson tells about an evangelistic Bible study he led while in college. Whenever he felt like he was out of his depth, he would take doubters and skeptics to a young man named Dave, who was a bold witness on campus. One time, a young man who was brought to Dave said, "I came from a family that doesn't believe in a literal resurrection and all that stuff. That's a bit much for us. But we're a fine family—a good, church-going family. We love each other, care for each other, and we do good in the community. We're a stable family. So what have you got that we don't have?"

Dave looked at the young man and said, "Watch me. Move in with me. I have an extra bed. Just follow me around. You see how I behave, what's important to me, what I do with my time, the way I talk. You watch me, and at the end of three months you tell me there's no difference."

Although the young man didn't take Dave up on his offer, he did keep coming back to watch how Dave lived his Christian life. Eventually the young man came to faith in Christ and went on to become a medical missionary. Carson said this about what he himself learned from Dave's challenge:

A Christian is saying in effect: "I'm one poor beggar telling another poor beggar where there's bread. I drank deeply from the wellsprings of grace. God knows I need more of it. If you watch me you'll see some glimmerings of the Savior, and ultimately you'll want to fasten on him. Watch me."²

One of the ways that others learn about the way of Christ is by watching your life and my life. And one of the ways you and I learn the way of Christ is by watching one another's lives. By watching one another's lives in the church, we watch Christ. And by watching Christ, we become more like Christ.

In today's text, Jesus tells James and John and the other disciples to keep watching him, and based on what they see, to reassess their definitions of power and greatness. In fact, Jesus even tells them to take a look at some of the sociopolitical authorities of their own time, noting how they overpower and tyrannize others, relying on coercion and control to hold onto power. "Not so with you," says Jesus. Instead, among you, greatness is a matter of service. Jesus even uses the word that refers to a servant, a slave, someone at the bottom of the social ladder. That's where Jesus is headed, to the bottom, in the humiliation of the crucifixion, because in the kingdom of God, greatness is about relinquishing power rather than grasping it.

Pastor Martin Copenhaver tells about a deacons meeting where someone noted that instead of being true to their high and momentous calling, the deacons were spending too much time delivering food to the homeless shelter and washing dishes after communion. How could they tend to important spiritual matters when they were so busy with such mundane tasks? "I feel like a glorified butler," complained one of the deacons.

So together they looked at the Book of Acts, where the word deacon first appears. There they discovered that the apostles commissioned the first deacons so that there would be someone to take food to the widows! As Copenhaver puts it, "They were indeed butlers, charged with the mundane task of delivering food, and also glorified because that simple act was an important expression of Christ's self-giving love. In this realm, everything is turned upside down, and many of our usual assumptions begin to shake loose. To lead is to be a servant. The place of greatest honor is not at the head table but in the kitchen. The greatest reward is not a gold watch but a dish towel."³

Today we give thanks for and affirm the call of God in the life of Linda and Ayodele as they begin their ministry as deacons. We give them our blessing and commission them to greatness. Not greatness as defined by a world that's passing away, but greatness as defined by the reign of God, a world brought into existence by Jesus' self-giving on the cross to redeem us. None of us can redeem others as Jesus did, but by faith we can join our lives to him and to what he's done for us, and follow him by pouring out our lives for others as he did.

So Linda and Ayodele, remember to keep watching Jesus and imitating him in the way of true greatness, not only for yourselves but for others who are watching you, especially fellow disciples here in the church. They'll be looking at you as you imitate Jesus, so that they can learn more about how to imitate him too. And together, we'll be a fellowship of disciples that reflects the greatness and glory of our Lord.

¹ From Tony Lane, *Timeless Witness* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004) 188.

² Van Morris, based on D. A. Carson's sermon, "Biblical Authority: The Exclusive Authority of Scripture for Faith and Practice" (2008).

³ Martin B. Copenhaver, "Jostling for Position," *Christian Century* (October 5, 1994) 893.