

What are you asking?
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I think one of the most interesting aspects of our scripture reading from Mark is the boldness with which James and John approach Jesus. “Teacher,” they say, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” It resonates as one of those statements that likely many of us used with our parents or other authority figures when we were children and teenagers: “I’m going to ask you something, and you have to promise that you’ll say yes.” It’s child-like manipulation. In these situations we know there is little chance of us getting what we want by asking the straight-up honest question, so we attempt to manipulate things with a little preamble: maybe with, “Mom, you know I love you, right?”; or, “Dad, if you say yes to this I promise to clean my room and wash the dishes every night this week.” In fact, I recall doing this kind of thing with teachers, too. In my middle grade years I never really felt the desire to go outside for recess in the cold winter months and would try to convince my teachers that they in some way needed my help in the classroom over the 15 minute break. While I liked being seen as the helpful, smart, and likeable student, I also couldn’t be bothered with putting all my winter gear on just to stand outside and freeze. So, I tried to manipulate the situation in my favour. But why do James and John, two adult men, act in this scheming way?

“Jesus, we want you to do whatever we ask of you.” Or, in this case, “we want you to promise us ahead of time that you’ll let us sit at your right and left hand in glory.” It’s a bold statement.

In fact, in Matthew’s account of this story, things go one step further: James and John have their mother talk to Jesus on their behalf, perhaps thinking that if their mom is asking, then how can Jesus possibly say no to a kind, older woman? I’m sure there are many teachers and leaders who work with children and youth who are quite used to this situation: a parent asking, or in many cases insisting, that rules or expectations be bent for their child in order for the child to have greater success or popularity or prestige or privileges. We might call it helicopter parenting today. I’m not sure what it was called in Jesus’ day.

But again, why did these men, these first followers of Jesus, attempt to sway Jesus in a direction that might get them seats at his left and right? Some might accuse James and John of being self-absorbed. They want glory. They dream of power and prestige and they want a piece of that, even if it means exploiting their relationship with Jesus. But Jesus is onto them. He never says yes or no, but asks, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And when the brothers reveal their sly intentions, Jesus tells them “You do not know what you are asking for.” And it’s true; they don’t know what they are asking for. For James and John, being at Jesus’ left and right means being his kingdom managers, the CEO and CFO, the big bosses who help oversee and orchestrate the spread of Jesus’ gospel. In this way, their hearts may be in the right place; this is a big task and they are up for it, but it’s also not at all what Jesus has told them is going to

happen. Three times before this moment Jesus has foretold his condemnation, humiliation and death. And three times the disciples have failed to understand what this really means. Which is why it is apparent that James and John had no idea what they were really asking for. To be at Jesus' left and right meant serving, meant suffering, meant death. And Jesus tries to help make this clear to them when he asks if they are able to drink from the same cup as him, and be baptised with the same baptism as him. "We are able," they insist. But the brothers seek prestige, not a cross. In this moment they cannot possibly conceive of a cross with a criminal on either side. They do not hold empathy or concern for Jesus—they don't understand. It's almost embarrassing.

If we were to look at this story in today's context, it might go something like this: a family member of yours is moved into palliative care and your first question upon learning this is, "Will I be able to get priority parking at the hospital now?" Or your close friend is diagnosed with terminal cancer and you ask, "Do you think this means I have a better chance of winning the cottage in the Princess Margaret Hospital lottery?" Rather than responding to these needs with care, concern, empathy, support, you instead miss the true tragedy of the situation and jump to questions of "what's in this for me?"

And the other disciples react in much the same way. When the other ten discover that James and John have asked for these prestigious seats, they get angry with the brothers—they want a piece of glory, too. Or, they think they do. Again, they seem a bit like children: upon discovering that someone might get something that they may not get, even if they didn't realize they wanted it, they certainly want it now. Not wanting to be left out of any potential power, prestige, or notable role in Jesus' kingdom, the other disciples respond in anger rather than with grace. All these childish responses almost seem comical coming from a group of adults.

It would be unwise of us, however, to wave off this story as just another time when the disciples showed how little they understood of Jesus' mission and good news. In what ways are we like James and John? While we may be quick enough to not make such insensitive requests, we do lean toward obtaining the best seats in the house and scheme for privileged positions. We want to live in the best neighbourhoods, have the respected job and good salary, a reputation for being good at what we do. We want kids at the top of their class and attending the best schools and registered in programmes that will help them "get ahead." Like James and John, we can be self-centred. We're not usually up front about these yearnings, but we do spend time plotting out ways to garner these privileged positions; we find room for these desires, even telling our hearts that they are required for living in this competitive, overbearing and unjust world—we tell ourselves we need to grasp onto whatever will help us to get by, and even better if we can obtain what is best, what is at the top, what is well-recognized and respected.

Is being on top really so bad? It really depends on why you want to be on top and what you plan to do with that position. James and John looked for the high seats in glory because they expected good things to come out of it for themselves; they had a lot of personal ambition. What they didn't understand was that Jesus' place in glory would

come not from being the most well-loved or popular or because his dad happens to be God, but because he would show humility, and he would use his divine nature not to show off as if the star of a magic show. His glory would come through serving and suffering and providing grace for all.

When I was a camp director, there was one year where, as part of our staff training, we asked the staff to list the hierarchy that exists in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We started with God at the top and worked our way down from there to the Synod, the Camp Board, the Camp Directors, the Camp Staff, and our campers at the bottom. As we went along, we stuck rectangles of paper with these names on a large wheel that could spin in place. Once we were satisfied with the order of our hierarchy, we talked about servant leadership—what it means to be a leader whose first order of business is not to keep working their way up to the top, but to serve those around them. Then we looked back at our hierarchical list on our wheel and flipped it on its head—literally. We spun that wheel around 180 degrees so that our campers were now at the top of our list and God was at the bottom. Servant-leadership, we decided, was not about things working from the top down, but from the bottom up, with God at the bottom reaching out with hands that serve and embrace the Synod, which serves and embraces the Camp Directors, who serve and embrace the Staff, who serve and embrace the campers. We all hold one another up.

“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10: 43-44).

The first hierarchy we had listed only existed in order to create a system of checks and balances. The hierarchy did not dictate the need for those at the bottom to become the servants of those above. Quite the opposite. Those at the top were needed to serve those around them—to create a system turned upside down, where humility rules above hierarchy and love persists over and above personal relevance, greed, or ambition.

In the book of Hebrews there is a great deal of focus on how Jesus is the high priest—as one writer aptly puts it, he is “the penultimate and unique high priest of God’s mysteries—the one who conquers sin and saves humanity once and for all.”¹ But Jesus is also the humble slave who endures condemnation and humiliation. He endures every weakness and every form of testing that human experience can offer. He suffers *with* us and, as such, *strengthens* us in our roles as servant leaders in our own “priesthoods.” We are, by God’s grace, imperfect priests, called and chosen by God through baptism, to claim God’s image in us, to become one with the high priest Jesus—who is actually the lowly one who bends his knee not in humiliation, but in humility; the gentle one who models servant leadership that emphasizes our communal ability and primary responsibility to love God and love one another. In stark contrast to the disciples’ ideas of leadership and the prevailing conception of leadership in both the ancient and modern world, Jesus presents a new definition of leader. A leader is a servant, not a tyrant, not someone set on personal gain, not greedy, not covetous. Jesus points to the example

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that the Gentile rulers set, lording their power over those beneath them and acting as tyrants. But the goal is to serve, not be served.

Of course, when all is said and done, it can be difficult to keep ourselves in check. We can easily confuse our goals to serve with our hope for personal success, or the success of our businesses and organizations, or even the perceived success of our church—counting new members off on our fingers without fully acknowledging our true mission as God’s family. When it comes to dealing with the disciples for their vainglory, Jesus rebukes them, but not in a cynical way. His rebuke reminds us that we are all human. We cannot expect perfection from humanity, but we can hope for movement toward a kind of perfection that, through our misunderstandings, our self-absorbance, and our mistakes, makes us more wise, more loving, more whole. Even the best and most committed leaders among us are subject to ambition and vanity, but that does not mean our response should be to become isolated or detached from the world, or to surrender to the ways of the world. Rather, in response, we should be cautious and self-reflective of our motives. We need to take a step back to examine ourselves and our goals and our causes and ask ourselves if we are responding to Jesus' call to servanthood. We can face our greed or ambition or vanity head on—recognize that we use them, overcome our insecurities that lead us to them, seek ways to heal—and in this way, put ourselves in a position to serve others a little more often and not be served ourselves all of the time.

Through servanthood, transformation occurs. In seeking ways to serve others, we are changed. Though it took them awhile to finally understand what Jesus was telling them, the disciples became transformed leaders of the new Church. And the questions they asked became less about what was in it for them and more about what was in it for us all. Grace is what is for us all—Christ’s grace come through humble servanthood.

I want to close with this well-known prayer by Francis of Assisi. It provides us with a powerful example of an approach that seeks humility and service:

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.