

JJ¹

A dear friend has just told you that they are terminally ill. You know they've been sick for a while, but no one knew what was wrong or how serious it was. The tests come back and show your friend has just days to live. What do you do? You cry with them. You mourn. You do what you can to help. None of you would say, "Hey, you know...I've always loved watching movies at your house. Any chance I can have your entertainment system?"

To do such a thing would be insanely rude and insensitive. But you know what, that's basically what James, John and their mother Salome did to Jesus just about a week before he suffered and died on the cross! The events of today's text take place on the Thursday before Palm Sunday. The day Jesus entered Jericho where he would meet a wee little man named Zacchaeus. Before they got to Jericho, Matthew tells us that Jesus "took the twelve disciples aside; and on the way he said to them, 'Look, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and experts in the law, and they will condemn him to death. They will hand him over to the Gentiles to mock, flog, and crucify him. On the third day he will be raised.' "

Jesus shares news that is both disturbing and amazing. It isn't the first time he has told them about his fast approaching death. This time Jesus gives even more information, telling them that it would be the Jews themselves who would hand him over to the Gentiles! What should have been sad, yet wonderful news was lost on them. In his account, Luke tells us that "The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about" (Lk. 18:34 NIV84).

The disciples still didn't get it. They still didn't fully understand what it meant for him to be the Messiah. And this lack of understanding shines through in what happens next.

"Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to him with her sons, kneeling and asking something of him." Now before we go any further, let's remember these are Jesus' devote followers. What's more, they're relatives. James and John, two-thirds of the so-called "inner circle," were Jesus' cousins. And their mother, Salome, was Jesus' aunt. They know and believe that he is the Savior. And although they don't understand everything Jesus has been saying to them, they know something big is coming. They seem to realize that the

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

showdown between Jesus and his enemies was going to happen on this trip.

Notice also *how* Salome approaches her nephew. She doesn't approach him as her nephew. She approaches him as her Savior and Lord. She kneels in front of him in faith and worship, yet the question she asks is terrible.

Jesus kindly and patiently asks, "What do you want?" And she says, "Promise that in your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and one on your left hand." Her faith in her Savior shines through, confident that Jesus will be victorious in battle, but sadly, what also shines just as brightly is her ignorance and selfishness.

Just think for a moment how shocking this request is. Jesus has just told them that he will suffer terrible things at the hands of both the Jews and Gentiles. That he'll be crucified! That he'll die! That he'll rise again after three days! But immediately they go thinking about themselves! And just so we're clear, this is James' and John's request, as Mark tells us (Mk. 10:35-45). Mom is just the mediator.

Sitting on the left and right of the king were great positions of authority. Obviously what they wanted was influence in the coming Kingdom. Or, at least in the

kingdom they thought was coming. You see, they were still confused by a lifetime of false expectations about the Messiah which had been taught to them from little on. The biggest false expectation was that the Messiah was going to establish an earthly kingdom. A kingdom that would feature the prosperity and strength Israel had under kings David and Solomon. A kingdom where they'd be rid of the Romans and the impostor Herodian kings.



What makes all this even worse is that just a chapter ago, perhaps just days before this event, Jesus promised his disciples, "... you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt. 19:28). They've already been promised thrones around his own throne, but Salome and her two sons are going to ensure that they have the best two thrones, the ones next to Jesus.

I picture Jesus responding with one of those sad laughs when he says, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" He's essentially saying, "You don't have a clue, do you? You haven't been listening. You really want to go through what I'm about to go through? You really think you want to follow me there?" And in blind arrogance they say, "We do."

To this Jesus responds, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not for me to give; rather these places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

James and John would get pretty much the exact opposite of what they asked. They were asking for glory in this life. Jesus informs them that it would be suffering for his name as they would indeed drink from the cup of suffering and persecution. James, the first of the Apostles to die, would be beheaded by Herod because he wouldn't stop preaching Christ (Acts 12:2). His brother John, though, would linger much longer. In fact, these two brothers would bookend the time of the Apostles. John would eventually find himself exiled on the island of Patmos, an old man and the last one left.

Sadly the other disciples aren't innocent in this matter either. When they hear what James and John asked, Matthew says, “they were angry with the two brothers.” They weren't just angry because of the boldness of their question. The word Matthew uses tells us that included with their anger was probably also some jealousy. Perhaps they were jealous that they hadn't thought of asking first and James and John beat them to the punch.

Friends, you and I can find ourselves in all this too. So often we listen to God's

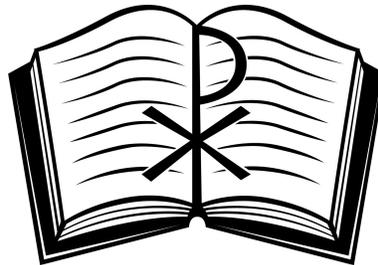
promises to us, beautiful promises, and as soon as we're done hearing them, we're off asking God for more. We hear God's promises and it's as if we say, “Okay God, that's all fine and dandy, but here's what I really want.”

It all comes down to confusion between our needs and wants—what we think is good for us, and what truly is good for us. “God, I know how you say I'm supposed to live my life, but that isn't working out so well for me. I'm going to do it my way.”—“God, I don't want any more lessons in patience, or humility!”—“God,

can't you give our family a break? We've been through so much, and now this!”—“God, I don't want any more faith strength training through hardship! I've had enough. Can't you let up? I've been following you all this while.

When am I going to get what's coming to me?” The disciples knew that there was glory to be found in following Jesus. They were just confused on where and when it would be found, like you and I so often are.

That's why Jesus again took them aside and said, “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over (even *tyrannize*) them. It will not be that way among you. Instead whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave—just as the Son of Man did



not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”

Friends, if we were asked by Jesus, **WHAT DO YOU WANT?** I think that all too often we would find ourselves asking for things just like James and John. But what about Jesus? What if we asked Jesus, “What do you want?” We know the answer. “...not to be served, but to serve, and to give [my] life as a ransom for many.” That’s what Jesus wants. That is what he has done!

The picture here is one we often see in movies where there is a hostage scene. Very often the person negotiating with the hostage taker negotiates a trade, themselves for the people being held hostage. We were held hostage by sin and God’s holy judgement. It wasn’t the devil Jesus paid by giving his life for us, it was the Father. God the Father is the one whose wrath over sin needed to be satisfied. Jesus has satisfied that wrath for all!

Jesus shows us that, even he, the King of kings, isn’t about being served, which is what you find among so many of the authority figures and rules of this world. No, the King of kings is all about serving. He is selfless. He gives everything for the benefit of everyone else.

Jesus shows us that it is going to be a struggle as we follow him in this life. It’s going to be hard. The world is going to hate us. The journey is going to be long. The glory isn’t going to come until heaven. And that’s another reason why Jesus tells us why we work and strive. We’re not working and striving to earn glory, pleasures or comfort in this life. That’s how the world works. That way is completely self-seeking. Jesus tells us that we are to be servants out of love for him who served us. We serve for the good of others. In our service we are to forget ourselves and let everything be about the person we are serving. And that is true whether it is in worldly matters, or in matters of faith.

Dear friends, rejoice that God has made you a citizen of his Kingdom, and that he still promises to take us into his heavenly glory, even after all our thoughts, acts and requests of selfishness. Rejoice that he has forgiven your sin and eagerly await the day when you shall stand by his side along with James, John, Salome and all those who have gone before us in faith. But until that day comes, follow your Savior and drink the cup he has given to you, praising his name all the while, because he drank his cup of suffering in full for you. Amen.

SDG²

² SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for “To God Alone Be The Glory”. This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn’t about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

Artwork by Ian M. Welch—Copyright 2013 Ian M. Welch. All Rights Reserved. paramentics.com

The sermon text itself is taken from: The Holy Bible, Evangelical Heritage Version™ (EHV™) copyright © 2016 The Wartburg Project. All rights reserved. www.wartburgproject.org