

Sent to Serve

This story tears at my heart every time I read it. Why? Because its gripping revelation is like a mirror and I don't



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like what I see! Each time I come to this point I ask God to help me open my heart wider to his grace, seek the leading of his Spirit, and embody his love in my attitudes and actions.

We have an advantage over those original disciples. We have four gospels that tell us about the meaning of the cross, kingdom values and how to live as God's people in a self-absorbed world. We can read the texts over and over, learn from the disciples' mistakes, and benefit from Jesus' powerful teachings. Have we not yet learned that we must receive the kingdom of God with the eager openness of a little child (Mk.10:15) or we will miss it? We watch the rich young ruler walk away sadly when Jesus explains that expending your life energy to win the wealth and success of this world keeps you from a life shaped by God's blessings (Mk.10:17-27). But, then we must be in good company, because we are so much like James and John, eager for the best seats when Jesus throws open the gates of heaven.

Let's not be too harsh toward James and John; after all, the idea of Messiah and God's Kingdom as the triumph of God's chosen people over all the world had been taught for generations. They have been mesmerized by Jesus' teaching and his miracles. Plus, there was John the Baptizer who must be the announcing prophet.

They have figured it out as they approach Jesus, and why not? Jesus chose them, and he was headed for Jerusalem at last for some sort of bold event. James and John are probably from one of the more successful fishing families in Galilee, so they know you can only get ahead if you work hard, make clear plans and remember that God promises blessings for his people. Within the group following Jesus there was great

hope mixed with some dread. There had been other "messiahs" who made great promises and enlisted fighters, but they had all ended up dead. This Jesus was totally different. He lived the heart of the Law, was totally unselfish, cared about people who suffered from physical illness or were social outcasts, raised the dead, cast out demons and spoke of God as "loving Father."

There was only one problem: instead of a glorious defeat of Rome and transforming his people to power and glory, Jesus describes how his life will end. The chief priests of Jerusalem and the Sanhedrin will take Jesus prisoner, try him as a counterfeit, and hand him over to the hated Romans. Those evil foreigners will mock, beat and kill him. But Jesus will rise from the dead! Only the bold get what they want, which explains the brothers' request: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (v. 35). Their vision is bold: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (v. 37). Jesus asks, "Are you sure you can drink from my cup and be baptized with my baptism?" (v. 38). Their eager response is a mixture of faith in Jesus and boldness born of ignorance. Jesus tells them they will indeed share his cup and baptism, but the preeminent seats they request in the kingdom are "for whom it has been prepared" (v. 40).

A young man requested a visit with me to talk about a call to ministry. As we talked he was excited about making God real to people, preaching that would move a congregation, and being part of God's blessings in peoples' lives. I talked about hard work, mundane responsibilities, education, keeping on in the face of disappointment, dealing with rejection ... and the joys of serving God, baptisms, helping people in tough times and moving beyond people with questionable motives. He liked the exciting parts but he didn't want to deal with real people in a real world. My final question to him was, "Do you think ministry is fun, full of success and blessings? We must have

talked two hours. In the end he said, "Well, I could tell you enjoy being a pastor and I just thought it would be a fun job with a lot of good people."

Jesus said, "whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many" (v. 45). The ten other disciples were angry with James and John, but Jesus carefully told all twelve disciples, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them ... but it is not so among you ... whoever wishes to become great among you must be the slave of all" (vv. 43-44). Plain words for modern disciples to heed and replicate!

Had we been present that day, would it have been any easier to accept Jesus' words concerning leadership, attitude and status? What we read, James and John witnessed. Today's world, even with electronic communications, available education, and historical records, is often as crude and unjust as that first century. Too often our heroes ride in a parade of obscene wealth, artificial glory and military backing. Even established religious organizations are facing public shame and decline because of long hidden immorality and compromised leadership.

Although we as individuals cannot right every wrong, expose every hypocrite and force the world to behave as Christians, we can make a difference within our family, our church, our neighborhood, and our community. We were not present when James and John asked for the prime spots in God's kingdom, but we have the record of four gospels they did not know. We have resources and opportunities those first disciples could not imagine. We understand what Jesus was teaching about compassion and the power of God's love.

We enjoy bountiful freedoms. The question we must continually face is: will we choose, not to be first but last, not to rule but to serve, not to condemn but to offer God's gift of life?