

St. James the Elder, 2010

Text: Mark 10:35-45

Title: Asking from Jesus

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“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask you.” That seems like an odd way to present a request to the Lord. But how often have you prayed this way? How often have your prayers begun, “God, I want you to give me what I’m asking for”? How often have you treated God as a genie or a fairy godmother, someone to do whatever you ask?

Too often we pray, “Lord, I want...”

There are several problems when you pray this way. There’s the obvious selfishness that comes when we demand things of God. There’s the pride that comes from thinking that you know best.

But the worst part of praying this way is that you limit God to your request. Your prayers are too narrow. You tell God what He needs to do, and He might just have something better in store for you.

That was certainly the case for James.

James and John wanted what was coming to them. It had been a long, hard three years of following Jesus. They had been with Jesus from the beginning. They were members of His inner circle. They had been on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. They had seen His glory

Now Jesus is drawing near to Jerusalem. It was almost glory time again. And so James and John call dibs on the top spots- Jesus’ right and left hand.

To be at Jesus’ right and left hand meant that they would be the ones calling the shots.

Everyone knows that kings didn’t have time to be bothered with the day-to-day details of running a kingdom. These duties were delegated to the closest and most trusted friends of the king. The right hand man was the King’s CEO, the one who made sure that all of his decrees were carried out.

This is what James and John wanted- the power spots.

But Jesus had something better for them. Jesus’ love for them was bigger than their narrow prayers.

Jesus said, “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you.”

Jesus tells James and John- if you're looking that sort of power and authority, if you want to control the people around you and order them around, you're in the wrong place. Go to the Gentiles if you want to live in that sort of a kingdom. That's their way, but it's not God's way.

Instead, Jesus has something better in store for them. Jesus tells them what it really means to be great, what it really means to be first. If you want to be great, be a servant. If you want to be first, be a slave.

Ironically, Jesus tells them exactly how to get what they want. Remember how the story began- "Teacher, we want... We want to be great; we want to be first. We want the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen."

But Jesus says to them, "I'll tell you how to be great. If you want to be great, be a servant; if you want to be first, be a slave."

Jesus tells James and John not just with words, but with actions. He shows them what it means to be great. Jesus says, "For even the Son of Man (that's me), came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus shows His disciples what it means to be great- to serve and to die.

That's why Jesus came, not to be served, not to order you around, not to make you His slave. Jesus came to serve you. Jesus came to be your slave. And Jesus does this by giving up His life for you.

We deserve to be slaves. Even more, we deserve to die.

We are selfish, arrogant and prideful. We seek the top spots and order everyone else around. We like the comfort that comes with wealth and power.

We are no better than James and John as they come to Jesus with their request. But Jesus loves James and John, and He loves you, too. He comes to die for your pride and your selfishness, and to make you to be like Him in life and in death.

James and John were great men. Not because they were Jesus' top disciples, not because they were leaders in the church. James and John were great because the Lord used them as His servants, and because they gave their lives in service to Him.

Today we hear of how James' life came to an end. He's the only disciple that Holy Scripture tells us how he died. He was the first disciple to die a martyr's death, put to the sword by King Herod.

James was great because he, too, was a servant, and gave up his life. He preached the gospel, and would not let Herod silence his voice. And now his death still bears testimony to his Lord.

It's just like Jesus said it would be. Jesus said that James would drink the same cup and be baptized with the same baptism. And Jesus' words came true when Herod put James to death.

Jesus granted James the privilege of sharing in His own suffering and in His own death. And that is what made James great.

James' service was great not because he did it so well, not because he was such a skillful preacher or miraculous healer. James' service was great because Jesus served through Him. Jesus sanctified His service, and made it holy, because He worked through James. James' words and actions were not his own.

When James preached, the people heard Jesus. And that's all that mattered. When you hear a preacher preach, don't ask yourself, "Was I entertained? Was I captivated? Was I moved?" Just ask yourself, "Did I hear Jesus?" Did the pastor deliver Jesus' words? That's what makes a great preacher, and a great servant.

James' death was great, not because it was so dramatic, or because of his great faith or his personal testimony. James' death was great because it was connected to Christ and His death.

Jesus says, "My cup is your cup. My baptism is your baptism. My death is your death."

James died a holy death, because it was a forgiven death, it was Jesus' death. Notice that Luke doesn't make a big deal about it. It's all of one verse (7 words in Greek). Jesus' death is the big deal.

Because Jesus died, you know that you will never have to go through death alone. We don't know when or how we will die. You may die quietly in your sleep, or after a long and painful illness. You may die in an accident, or you may be killed by violence. It could come today, or it could come years from now.

But you know one thing for sure. Not even death will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The sword did not separate James from Jesus' love. God worked His death for good.

And we know that death could not hold Jesus Christ. Because Jesus rose, you, too, will rise with Him, and James, too, and the rest of the disciples, no matter how they died. Because we are joined with Jesus in His death, we will also be joined with Jesus in His life.

So go ahead. Ask Jesus to give you what you want. Ask Him to make you great and to put you first. He'll answer your prayer by making you a servant and a slave, and you will lose your life, just like James. And that's a good thing.

Happy St. James' day.