

“Be Careful What You Ask For”

Mark 10:35-45

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Stone Mountain, Georgia
October 18, 2009

Have you ever made a request of someone and as soon as you did, you realized that it was the wrong thing to do? I suppose we all have. At least we can take consolation in the fact that we are not alone. Even two of Jesus' disciples did this. Surely, they wished they could have taken their absurd request back as soon as the words left their mouth. At least I hope so.

“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ Jesus said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’ They said, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right side and one at your left in your glory.’ Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized?’ They replied, ‘We are able.’ ‘The cup that I drink you will drink, and the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized. But to sit at my right hand or to my left is not mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared.’

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and 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 to give his life a ransom among many’ ” Mark 10:35-45.

If awards were given for insensitivity, James and John would win, at least in Mark's gospel. This exchange took place immediately after Jesus' final prediction of his suffering and death. Again, you would think two of Jesus' closest friends and confidants would be greatly concerned about his well-being and need for support. I say again because the last time Jesus warned the disciples of his death at the hands of his enemies, they argued about who was the greatest among them. James and John must have decided that honor belonged to them.

I don't know when I have read a story that yields more questions that need to be considered. I have developed this sermon around some of them.

When was the last time you acted so immaturely or childishly? It is one thing for a child to make the request in 10:35. It is another for an adult to do so.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” How old were you when you last used that line? 6, 9, 12? I hope you were not any older than that.

How old were James and John? I don't know their exact age, but they are not children. If this were not so serious, it would be funny.

There is nothing funny about adults acting like children, is there? What's the root of it? Usually, it is selfishness. The person making an absurd request like this doesn't care about anything but getting his or her way. The needs or rights of others are pushed aside. They don't matter, at least not as much as getting one's way.

“When I was a child, I talked like a child and I reasoned like a child,” Paul wrote. “When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me” I Corinthians 13:11. Are there some childish ways you need to abandon? I'm sure the people around you would appreciate it. Ask God to help you follow Paul's example.

When was the last time you were confident about something only to be so wrong? “You don't know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, ‘We are able.’ ”

I wonder if Jesus smiled or cried. He knew what was waiting for him in Jerusalem, a cross, and how James and John would react. They would be no where around when Jesus would drink the cup of suffering. Their confidence would give way to confusion and fear.

Confidence is a good thing. Leaders need to have it. They also need to be humble and aware of their limitations. Wise people ask questions and count the cost before they make wild claims. The disciples found out the hard way.

When Jesus asked James and John if they were able to drink that cup of sacrifice and sorrow or be baptized in the waters of unprecedented loyalty and commitment, wouldn't it have been better had they replied, "What cup must you drink? What kind of baptism are you referring to? What kind of commitment will be required? What do you think?"

It is one thing to be confident. It is another to be cocky and ignorant. Sometimes there is a fine line between the two and wise is the person who knows when he or she has crossed that line.

Have you crossed that line? Do you need to be more humble, a better listener and more teachable? I am confident the one who dealt redemptively with James, John and the other disciples will help you, too.

When was the last time you made your friends angry? What happened? Did you put your interests above theirs? Did you cut a deal with someone that cut them out? Did you exploit a relationship to your benefit?

People don't take kindly to friends that betray them. The other disciples certainly did not. "When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John." Are you surprised? I am not.

Who could blame them? James and John tried to form an alliance that would shut them out. They jumped the gun on the others by jockeying for positions of power and authority. They exploited their relationship with Jesus as a part of his inner circle of confidants. This was unfair and divisive.

It is obvious that healthy communities are not built upon greedy ambition. As Kathleen Wakefield writes, "The race to the top always creates a huge imbalance in society and leaves those behind feeling worth less or worthless." Jealousy and strife rear their ugly heads every time greedy ambitions surface.

Those of my generation will remember the give and take between Dick and Tommy Smothers. When they argued, Tommy would look at Dick out of disgust and shout, "Mom always loved you more!"

Favoritism and the exploitation of it always lead to friction. Those vying for favored positions of authority behind closed doors fail to see the value and worth of all persons and their place in the world. Few things can more quickly destroy community.

Have you pushed others off the ladder of success you were climbing? Do you have some apologizing to do?

When was the last time you used someone's immaturity to teach a valuable lesson? Aren't you amazed at Jesus' patience? I am. He seized this opportunity to talk to his disciples about the importance of being servant leaders. It was not positions of honor or prestige they should seek, but opportunities for quiet, humble service. Their egos did not need to be fed but their spirits, through deeds of love.

On September 10, 1946, while riding a train from Calcutta to Darjeeling, Mother Teresa encountered Christ. He simply said to her, "I thirst." About that experience, Dr. Michael Stroope writes, "Mother Teresa took this to mean that Christ was the diseased and dying of India and she was to give them water. She said that Christ invited her to join him as a 'victim of India.' This meant that she was to take to herself the suffering and death of those abandoned and left to die. Toward the end of this encounter, she heard the words, 'Come be my light,' and she did.

Her years of service in Calcutta were not a call to become a saint or a Noble Laureate. It was a call to suffer and to be light in and through that suffering."

Do you think James and John heard that call? I want to believe they did and perhaps the seeds of understanding may have been planted the day they made this self-absorbed request. I think it is possible they learned some things through this experience that changed the course of their lives. What were they?

It was time for them to grow up and become responsible and mature.

It was time for them to be humble, listen more and talk less.

It was time for them to be more empathetic and walk in others' shoes.

It was time for them to hear the pleas for help that others ignored.
It was time for them to apologize for their selfish behavior.
It was time for them to see the bigger picture and put others' interests above their own.
It was time for them to count the cost before making commitments.
It was time for them to adopt Jesus' values and lifestyle instead of the world's.
It was time for them to make a seat at the table for all people instead of vying for the choice seats.
It was time for them to serve, not be served.
It was time for them to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus.

What do you need to learn? What is it time for you to do? What are you waiting for?