

**“Ignorance is not Bliss”**

**Mark 10:35-45**

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Reality shows are some of the most popular on television. While there are many kinds of reality shows, it seems the most popular ones revolve around competition where participants are voted off one by one until a winner is crowned. *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *The Apprentice* are good examples of this.

It is obvious that the viewing public likes to watch ordinary people responding to extraordinary challenges. I have noticed, however, that some of the people on these competitive shows can be brutal as the competition mounts. In order to be the best and win the top prize, alliances are formed as participants are eliminated. It is interesting to watch contestants negotiating in private to form these alliances. You hear some strange requests and bold promises.

Forming alliances to achieve favors or success is nothing new, is it? Two of the disciples, James and John, attempted to forge an alliance to satisfy their egos and ambitions. I doubt the outcome was what they anticipated, though. Let me share the details with you.

The exchange between Jesus and his disciples in our passage took place immediately after Jesus' final prediction of his suffering and death. Again, you would think the disciples would be greatly concerned about our Lord's wellbeing and need for support. I say again because the last time Jesus warned them of his death at the hands of his enemies, the disciples argued about who was the greatest among them. They are still thinking of themselves, not him.

What were they thinking? How insensitive and heartless could they be? This time Jesus' prediction of his crucifixion was followed by the strangest request by James and John while they were alone with the Lord.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” This sounds like the way a child would approach a parent when he or she knows the impending request has no merit. I think I was about ten or eleven the last time I tried this.

“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’ ” Mark 10: 35-40.

I am intrigued by what Jesus said to James and John immediately upon hearing their request for a favored position of honor, power and authority in his kingdom. “You do not know what you are asking.” **I wonder what I do not know that I need to know. What must I do to learn it?**

**What did the disciples not know when they made their audacious request to sit on the right and left of Jesus?** It was obvious that they did not know that Jesus' way of living and leading was far different from the world's. It was not positions of honor or prestige they should seek, but opportunities for quiet, humble service. Meeting others' needs was more important than satisfying their egos. Ministry was not about them but the people that needed 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 become 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 give his life a ransom for many” Mark 10:42-45.

I wonder how they could miss this point, especially since the journey they were on from the northern region to Jerusalem was peppered with lessons on sacrificially serving others.

Do you recall what Jesus said after he heard them discussing which of them was the greatest? “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all” Mark 9:35. Were the disciples daydreaming when Jesus told the rich, young ruler to sell all he had, give the money to the poor and follow him? How could they have missed this defining trait of his ministry? The same way we do, I suppose.

Three months before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church on this passage. Listen to an excerpt from that historic sermon.

“Now very quickly, we would automatically condemn James and John and say they were selfish. Why would they make such a selfish request? But before we condemn them too quickly, let us look calmly and honestly at ourselves, and we will discover that we, too, have those same basic desires for recognition, for importance. We have that same desire for attention, that desire to be first. There is deep down within all of us a drum major instinct, a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade. Alfred Adler, the great psychoanalyst, contends that the quest for recognition is the most basic impulse, the basic drive of human life.

And you know, we begin early to ask life to put us first. Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention. All through childhood, the drum major instinct is a major obsession. In adult life we still have it and never get by it.”

Dr. King was right, wasn't he? We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade. This is not to say that we should not work hard and strive to excel. It is to say that we should work equally as hard inspiring and motivating others to excel, making sure they have the same opportunities for achieving potential that we do.

The wonderful thing about Jesus' model for success is that everybody can be great, not just a few. Everybody can serve others; therefore everybody, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, employer or employee can be great in God's eyes.

**What else did the disciples not know that would have been helpful? They did not know how the other disciples would react to their request.**

“When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John” Mark 10:41. Who could blame them? James and John tried to form an alliance that would shut them out. They jumped the gun on the others in 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.

**There is one other thing that the disciples did not know. They had no idea what it would have meant had Jesus granted their wish.**

I recall only one time in scripture when Jesus was prominently portrayed for all to see with someone on his right and left. Do you recall when it was? It was during the crucifixion! This was the cup that Jesus knew they were not prepared to swallow.

Be careful what you ask for, you just may get it. How many times have you heard that? Always count the cost. Even good things come with high prices.

“You do not know what you are asking,” Jesus said to his disciples. That statement haunts me. How about you? **What do you not know that you need to know?**

What do you not know that you need to know about relationships, arranging priorities, handling problems, challenges and temptations? What do you need to know that you don't about following Jesus? What do you need to know about being a good mate, parent, neighbor, citizen, church member, student, employee, employer or leader?

**Furthermore, what must you do to find out what you need to know at this point along your journey?**

Begin by accepting a large dose of humility. Learning begins when you acknowledge that you don't know everything. Being teachable is one of life's greatest virtues.

Seek wise counsel. Probe the mind of others and discover what they have learned along their journey. This can be done over a cup of coffee talking to a friend or reading a good book. Thoreau wrote, "No greater miracle could take place than for us to look through another's eyes for an instant."

Study the scriptures and pray. Seek wisdom from those whose experiences with God and others are recorded in the Bible and then pray that God will help you understand the implications for your life.

The most recent book that I purchased and have begun reading is by my friend, Dr. John Killinger, [Seven Things They Don't Teach You in Seminary](#). Dr. Killinger has authored more than fifty books and has pastored seven churches. For fifteen years he was a professor at the Vanderbilt Divinity School, his dream job.

As you can surmise from the title, in this book Dr. Killinger tells his readers what he wished he had been taught in seminary that he was not. This is not to say that his seminary experiences were unproductive. To the contrary, they were very beneficial. However, once he began pastoring, he realized there was much that he did not know about people and churches that he needed to know. This book is his way of sharing this information with prospective ministers as well as lay leaders.

I suppose there is a book inside all of us about what we wish we had known about life, relationships or our profession that we did not know when we began our journey. Makes you wonder what we do not yet know that we need to understand, doesn't it? For this reason, let me encourage you to do two things. Continue to grow and learn all your life. Share what you are learning with those that are seeking. I assure you that the One that patiently taught his disciples will help you.

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