

FROM SELFISHNESS TO SACRIFICE

Mark 10:35-41

Acts 12:1-2

Our Lord and His disciples were going up to Jerusalem not long before the crucifixion. As they went along together, for the third time He told them of His approaching death and resurrection. As was His custom, when He spoke of His death He also emphasized the fact that He would rise again. Although He taught His disciples that He was going to suffer and to die for them, and for all others who would believe on Him, they were thinking of their own selfish interests.

I. The Request. Mark 10:35-37

On this journey our Lord was confronted with self-seeking from the inner circle of the disciples who were dearest to Him and from whom He had expected the most. It seems that James and John had inherited from their mother the consumingly powerful trait of being boundlessly ambitious. These men were ambitious to obtain prominent places in Christ's kingdom. They thought they would like to have the highest ranks and the noblest titles in the kingdom which He had described to them. Perhaps they were slightly jealous of Peter and wanted to make sure that he would not outrank them. Ambition is not wrong in itself, but when it becomes so extreme that it projects self forward at the expense of others, it is selfish and sinful. James and John were striving for self-exaltation. They revealed the very quality of self-seeking which they despised in Peter. It is disquieting to find such ambitions among those who were chosen by the Lord, and especially in the inner circle of that company. Why had Christ called such men? The Master had selected them not for what they were, but rather for what they might yet become.

Matthew informs us that the request of James and John that they might sit one on the right hand and the other on the left of Christ in His kingdom was made through their mother.

It seems that men have an innate desire to be important and to occupy the first place. There are many ways by which this desire is expressed, but they all add up to the same thing. Everybody wants to feel important. Carl Sandburg once said, "We all want to play Hamlet." In other words, we want to be assigned the leading role.

Psychologists describe this drive as the dominant impulse in human nature. Sigmund Freud, an influential psychiatrist of the last century, said that man's greatest desire or his most dominating drive is to be loved. Carl Jung used only slightly different terminology when he insisted that man wants most of all to feel the sense of security. Alfred Adler said that man's chief want is a feeling of significance. It is the nature of a normal person to seek significance, to covet the spotlight, to become drum major or to "play Hamlet."

We see this innate drive in childhood. Quite unconsciously the baby's cry is an appeal for attention. It is calling for attention because it is egocentric. It seeks its own way without regard for the interests of others. Its ability to survive depends on its success at getting attention, or its becoming the center of attraction among adults who can satisfy its basic needs. As children grow older this basic drive to dominate seems to be a perfectly natural tendency.

The desire to feel important remains during adulthood. We never grow out of it. At least part of one's drive is that he may be recognized as successful, that he may receive the recognition and approval of others. We all seek the admiration of our friends. Praise is "Vitamin A to the ego." The only time we object to it is when it is directed to our competitors. The deep yearning for approval is recognized by the advertisers and supersalesmen in the commercial world. Much of the appeal of modern advertising is to human vanity, to the idea that select people should own exclusive and select wares.

This tendency to seek significance can be abused. Think of the monstrous evils that have plagued the world because of man's untamed ego. Napoleon, the little Corsican, in his mad desire to be the greatest military strategist in history plunged all of Europe into a blood bath. Hitler, who sought to enthrone himself in the hearts of the German people as a god, brought his country down to humiliating defeat. The egomaniacs from Alexander the Great to his modern counterparts have all brought untold misery to the people of their day. One of the by-products of an untamed ego is snobbishness. When a man assumes that he is superior, whether he is or not, he becomes a snob.

James and John planned first to get a pledge from their Lord, and then through their mother to make their request. They wanted a sort of blank check from Christ for future benefits, in order to fill it in as they desired. But our Lord does not issue such checks. Their request was: "Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory." They wanted their thrones to rank next to that of Christ. They did not regard the interests of Christ, but they were extremely interested in self-advancement. "In honor preferring one another" was ruthlessly ignored by them. Their desire to reign with Christ was praiseworthy, but their request for preferred positions was selfish and made in utter ignorance of God's plan. It is God's plan to give His children rewards, not according to their selfish desires, but according to their faithful service. Instead of considering the will of God and His glory, all that was involved in their request was the matter of places of preeminence for themselves.

How their selfishness and self-seeking must have grieved their Lord! Instead of thinking about the hard things that were about to happen to Christ, and getting ready to be His brave followers, they were thinking only of an easy thing for themselves. How could they have been thinking so much of themselves while Christ was explaining about His death? They were Christian men who loved Christ and had left all to follow Him, but their request revealed that they had not won the victory over the sin of selfishness.

II. The Reply. Mark 10:38.

In His reply to that selfish request Christ did not expatiate on their folly. He did not censure them. All He said was that they did not know the significance of the thing they asked. With grief in His heart and pathos in His voice, Christ replied, "Ye know not what ye ask." There is a sermon in those words. As far as the end was concerned they knew for what they were asking. What they did not know was the means by which the desired end must be attained. They did not understand the cost of the places of honor they had requested; the suffering that preceded the glory.

Frequently we pray for certain things without realizing what we must face if God answers our prayers. We pray for patience, for holiness, to be made more like our Lord; and when God answers us by leading us into the furnace of affliction, we begin to complain.

III. The Response. Mark 10:39-40.

To teach the apostles what was involved in their request, Christ asked the two: "Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Quickly they responded, "We can," or "We are able," even forgetting to add "by Thy help." Self-confidence stood out very prominently in that brave and courageous reply.

IV. The Resentment. Mark 10:41.

We do not wonder that the ten apostles were disturbed when they learned that James and John had been trying to steal a march on them by asking for the chief places in the kingdom. Their indignation was natural because they thought an unfair advantage had been taken of them. They were incensed at the assumption that these two were superior to the other ten. Since human nature is the same the world over, it is not surprising that the ten showed their resentment by their looks, their words and their actions.

V. The Result.

As a result of Christ's searching question, James felt that he could drink any cup of sorrow and bear any amount of pain for the sake of his Lord, so with simple confidence and daring love said, "We are able."

The Lord Jesus let it be known that the seats of honor were not His to grant. People are not appointed or elected to honor; rather, they achieve it. True greatness is not the result of favoritism, but of fitness. Service to God and one's fellows is the pathway to the seat of honor. If James, or anyone else, wanted to excel, let him excel in service.

Christ made it clear that greatness does not consist in the power we have over others, or the position of honor we win. Rather, it consists in the quality and quantity of our service. Our rank in God's realm is determined by the spirit and extent of our service. The real test comes when another gets the place we held. How do we take it? Do we accept the lowlier place without the sense of wounded pride or personal grievance?

Cheerful and faithful service, measured by self-forgetfulness, is the shortest road out of self-centered living. Two ladies were talking about a mutual friend. "How she suffered!" said one. "But how happy she was!" rejoined the other. "Yes," said the first, "but she was always thinking about others." That simple conversation contained one of the deepest secrets of life. Real joy springs from the willingness to spend or to be spent in service for the Lord and others.

If you are aspiring to recognition and prestige, you are certainly laying yourself open to wounded self-esteem when your plans are thwarted, as they are sure to be. To serve others in the name of Christ and for His sake will bring the best out of you. That will give you a purpose and a pattern for living that will satisfy and endure. In Christ's kingdom the highest place goes to the one who renders the best service, who endures the most suffering and who makes the greatest sacrifices for the Lord.

James resolved that he would overcome his spirit of self-aggrandisement which had brought him so low in the esteem of others and in his own estimation. He was determined to win back the esteem which he had forfeited by his folly. It is, however, one thing to descend, and another to climb. The former is much easier than the latter.

Nothing more is recorded about James until he reappears for an instant in Acts 12. Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, had assumed power in Palestine. With a view to increasing his popularity and making his position secure, the King instituted a persecution of the Christians. With a view to pleasing many of his subjects, he decided to stamp out Christianity. He decided to begin by first executing the most prominent and influential leader among the apostles and in the church at Jerusalem, who was James. Herod was really afraid of the tremendous power and influence of James, who had proved himself to be utterly uncompromising in his convictions and absolutely selfless in his determination. The fact that he was picked for execution indicates that he occupied a most notable position as an apostle.

When the early Christians heard the first mutterings of the storm, some of them would fain have persuaded James to flee for his life. But flight was not in his bold and eager nature. As the danger drew nearer, he preached the more vehemently and besought the people to be reconciled to God.

James was led out for execution. Eusebius has preserved a tradition that the man who denounced James was so greatly impressed by his Christian courage and restraint that he became a believer in Christ and begged to be baptized. He was condemned to die at the same time as James. On the way to the place of execution he begged James to forgive him for the wrong which he had done to him, and without hesitation James kissed his cheek and said, "Peace be unto thee!" Then the blow fell, for we read, "And Herod killed James the brother of John with the sword." James went bravely to the place where he was beheaded, and became the first of the apostles to sacrifice his life for his Lord.

James walked the long, long road from personal selfishness to sacrifice of self. He gave his life for his Lord. Certainly no more could have been asked of him or of any other man. He must have been a comparatively young man when he died for his faith, probably in his forties. But it is not a question of how long we live; rather, it is a question of how well we live. It is far better to lose your life for Christ's sake than to save it for your own sake.

In connection with the question, "Are you able to drink the cup?", Earl Marlatt wrote:

"Lord, we are able, our spirits are Thine.
Remold them, make us like Thee, divine.
Thy guiding radiance above us shall be
A beacon to God, to love and loyalty."

Can you drink the Lord's cup of sorrow? Are you able to face scorn, ridicule, hatred, insult, persecution and death for your Lord? Can you say with James, "I am able?" Then happy are you! For, if you suffer with Christ, you shall be glorified with Him.