

THE ARISTOCRACY OF SERVICE.

Mark 10:35-45

A short time before the crucifixion, our Lord and His disciples were going up to Jerusalem. As they went along together, for the third time Jesus 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 had been teaching His disciples that He was going to suffer and to die for them and for all those who should believe on Him, they were thinking of their own selfish interests.

I. The Request. Mark 10:35-37.

On this journey Jesus was confronted with a case of self-seeking from the inner circle of the disciples who were dearest to Him and from whom He had expected the most. James and John were ambitious to obtain prominent places in Christ's kingdom. They were striving for self-exaltation. Ambition is not in itself wrong, but when it becomes so extreme that it projects self forward at the expense of others, it is selfish and sinful. James and John displayed shrewdness in planning first to get a pledge from their Lord, and then to make their request. When they made their appeal it was just as earnest and definite as words could make it. They asked Him to pledge Himself in advance to give them whatever they might desire. They were attempting to get a sort of blank check from Jesus for future benefits, in order that they might fill it in as they desired. But the Lord does not issue such checks.

Their request was a very extraordinary one, both as to the manner and the matter of it, that they would ask and expect Him to promise them this before they declared the particular favor they had to ask of Him. When Jesus asked what it was they desired, they bluntly said, "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 Christ's throne. 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 for the privilege of reigning 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. You may say, "What boldness and arrogance!" Yes, but rest assured that self-seeking always leads to bold and impudent self-assertion.

How sad Jesus must have been, on account of their selfishness! Instead of thinking about the hard things that were about to happen to Jesus, 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 Jesus was explaining about His death? And mind you, they were Christian men. They loved Christ, and they had left all to follow Him. But, their request revealed the fact that they had not won the victory over the sin of selfishness.

II. The Reply. Mark 10:38.

In His reply to their ill-advised request, Jesus was very considerate of their weakness. He did not expatiate upon their folly and fault. 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, Jesus 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 glibly for certain things without realizing what we must face if God answers our prayers. We pray to God for patience, for holiness, to be made more like our blessed Lord; and when God begins to answer our prayers by leading us into the furnace of affliction, we begin to complain.

To teach them what was involved in their request, Jesus inquired, "Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

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

Quickly they responded, "We can," even forgetting to add "by thy help." Their ignorance and self-confidence stood out very prominently in their reply. They revealed their ignorance of themselves when they declared their ability to drink "the cup" of His inward sufferings, and "to be baptized with the baptism" of the outward sufferings imposed upon Him by others. However, it is well to remember that James became the first martyr of the apostolic group, and John was the last one of them to lay down his life for Christ.

IV. The Resentment. Mark 10:41.

We do not wonder that the other ten disciples 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. In reality, all were alike and each was desirous of the chief place for himself. As a rule, it is our own faults that we condemn most when we see them mirrored in others. If the two had had the right spirit, they would not have made their request. On the other hand, had the ten have had the right spirit they would only have thought the two had acted foolishly and been sorry for them, but they would have done little more than ignore the whole affair. Instead, being angry, they showed their resentment by their looks, by their words, and by their actions.

V. The Requirement. Mark 10:42-45.

Jesus was grieved that among His disciples, whom He expected to love each other, there should be jealousy and quarreling. Has it ever dawned on you, that nearly all church troubled come about by one of more members having a desire to be honored and to rule and to be pleased instead of desiring to serve and to help.

It is interesting to note how Jesus dealt with the situation. Determined to nip their bickering in the bud, He reminded them that ambition for power over men belongs to the world. In His Kingdom ambition is to be for service only, and not dominion. According to His measurements, a disciple is great if he renders great service. Greatness consists in the extent and quality of our service. If any man desires to be great in the day when rewards are meted out, let him see to it that in this life he takes a lowly place of loving service on behalf of his fellow believers, letting the love of Christ be his impelling motive.

The real root of the dispute that had arisen was a wrong idea of greatness, and in this wrong idea they all shared. They all thought that the mark of greatness is a position of power; and this power they all coveted. If James and John had had the right idea of greatness they would not have asked for the big positions as they thought them to be. But had the other disciples had the right idea, they would not, they would not have been so angry with James and John. They might have thought them foolish and felt sorry for them, but they would have done little more than ignore the whole affair.

They were all wrong together. Greatness, as Jesus told them, does not consist in the power we have over others or the position of honor or authority we win. It consists in the extent and quality of our service. If we think of the position we win as the mark of our greatness, we are merely copying the pagans. We are accepting the world's

standard of worth. The principle of Christ's Kingdom is very different. Our rank in God's realm is decided by the spirit of our service.

By successive stages our ideas of aristocracy have been changing. The oldest form of aristocracy was that of birth. Later, came the aristocracy of money, where the badge of greatness was the size of a man's bank account. It still lingers. What is he worth? still means, how much money does he have? A man may not have much money, but the coveted thing is to have a position in which he can make his will prevail or dominate others. The real aristocracy is that of service. That was one of the revolutionary ideas of Christ's teaching. On its acceptance or rejection the progress of society depends.

Our full acceptance of this idea demands a change in our valuation of people, and of our attitude to money and status. Money still ranks high as our measure of a man's value. Power ranks even higher. Few people can withstand the fascination. To be able to make things happen, to sway the minds of men, to coerce those who oppose us still intoxicates many people. Men fight for positions of influence and prestige. Vital decisions may be made, not on the grounds of whether they are right or wrong, but as the outcome for a struggle for power. The love of power is at least as corrupting as the love of money, and can be far more dangerous. The power motive is all the more deadly when it is disguised as the desire to serve.

The real test comes when someone gets the place we hold, or when those we are serving reject our help or our advice. How do we take it? Do we accept the lowlier place without the sense of wounded pride or personal grievance? The reality of our service, like that of Christ, is measured by our self-forgetfulness.

The spirit of service is the secret of happiness. It is the shortest road out of self-centered living. Two women were talking of 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 was a simple conversation, but it contains one of the deepest secrets of life. Real joy in service springs from the spirit of that service, the willingness to spend or to be spent for others in the service we do. If we are on the outlook for recognition or prestige, we lay ourselves open to wounded self-esteem whenever our plans are thwarted, as they are almost sure to be. If we are genuinely seeking to serve others, there will not be any poison in the wound. It is the love of power that gives rise to jealousy and rivalry. If we only believed that "all service ranks the same with God," the place we hold will make little difference to our happiness or satisfaction. As we follow Christ we awaken to the needs of others, for He is one with them. To serve others in His name and for His sake can bring the best out of us. That alone can give us a purpose and a pattern for living that will satisfy and will endure.

It is in the ranks of those who serve that we find the true aristocracy, whatever the service be. When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ there will be some surprises. We shall find that it is often the lowly, and the obscure, who wear the badges of honor. In one of his pictures of Christ, Paul tells us that "He made Himself of no reputation, but took on Him the form of a servant." Then he went on to say, "Wherefore God hath highly exalted Him."

Christ suggested that the humblest service constituted the highest dignity. He said that the highest place in His kingdom was appointed for the man who rendered the best service, who could endure the most suffering, and who could make the greatest sacrifice. Herein lies the secret of ultimate success, a principle which the world rejects because it is too costly.

If all church members could only see that "all service ranks the same with God," the positions they occupy would not make so much difference to them. Real joy in service springs from a willingness to spend or to be spent for Christ in the service of others. In Christ's Kingdom the highest place is provided for the person who renders the best service, who endures the most suffering, and who makes the greatest sacrifices.