

Sunday March 20, 2022  
Lesson 3: A Topsy-Turvy Kingdom  
Scripture: Mark 10: 35-45

**Context:**

In today's lesson, we continue in the book of Mark and marching towards the cross as we read of another conversation where Jesus addresses what it means to be his disciples. Our purpose will be to recognize and witness the radical nature of God's kingdom. We will learn of how to be a disciple of Jesus means to surrendering everything and to have our expectations upended.

The scripture passage begins with two of the disciples of Jesus approaching him. James and John, sons of Zebedee, come to ask him a favor. In previous sections of the chapter, Jesus has warned them of the difficulty in following him. Yet James and John take the invitation as something else.

Their question comes with a caveat. They ask Jesus to do for them whatever they ask and agree to it before they ask the question. Like any prudent parent or teacher, Jesus makes them say what they want before he will reply.<sup>1</sup> James and John then present him to him a plan where they will participate in his coming glory and have positions of privilege, sitting at his right and his left.

When Jesus still pushes them even further indicating they do not know what they are asking for, to drink of the same cup or receive the same baptism as him, they boldly declare they can do so. Jesus then must explain to them how then they will receive those things and yet the request they offer up is not up to him. Little do James and John know how in Jerusalem Jesus will come into his glory, not by way of a throne, but by a cross with two criminals hanging on either side of him.<sup>2</sup> James and John have no clue for what they ask and will soon learn not to ask for things which they cannot receive or handle.

The other ten disciples hear about this request and are incensed. They begin to squabble, and Jesus must call them together to explain what it means to follow him. Pulling to the modern allusion of the Gentiles (Romans in their case), Jesus points to how his reign is different. They are not called to lord their position over others but are instead called to a life of service. The whole point of the Son of Man was he came not to be served, but to serve and give his life for others.

What is interesting with Jesus is how he approaches his disciples, who clearly do not fully understand him. He accepts them as they are, but firmly points them in a new direction, in the way he is going himself.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he wants them to be like him and discover a fuller life than what they would seek on their own. Following Jesus means seeing a new way of living in relation to God and those around them. The disciples are not to seek they greatness. Instead, they are to seek new life and become servants.

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson Jr., Lamar. "Mark." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009),192.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 193.

## Application

The story of James and John asking about glory and who will sit at the right and the left demonstrates the greatest challenge people will face if placed in the right place at the right time. The challenge is power and what you will do when it is given unto you. And as we learn with James and John in their zealousness, it still may not lead to the road of glory which we seek.

Before any of us can come to any conclusions about the arrogance of either of these two disciples, we should be quick to look in the mirror and see the reflection in front of us. Who among us, has not been tempted to think greatly of themselves and then seek power for the gain of oneself? It doesn't have to do with achievement or performing well; those are beautiful things. It must do more with how we see power and use it for our own sake to benefit ourselves, while justifying who it may harm or push aside in the process.

We've seen the overambitious nature of the high school junior who wants to be President of the SGA only to have a side smear campaign of the other candidate. We know of the people who fudge in the office about numbers so they can get ahead. And we know of the clergy who plot and lie about current events so they may be able to have control and implode the system for their own glory, complete with their list of credentials of why they can do what they're doing. James and John are not the only ones guilty of seeking power and greatness.

The scary part of it all is it can start so innocently. About two weeks ago, I saw the Alabama Shakespeare Festival production of *Macbeth*. In addition to the magnificent rendition of the play, I was struck by the timeless lesson I gleaned from it which I first noticed when I read the play in high school, a play based on a real figure in Scottish history named Macbeth. In the play, Macbeth started out as an honorable man. He was respected. He did good things, leading his troops to victory and honoring the king. He was destined for greatness.

Yet upon stumbling upon some mysterious women, voices begin to whisper to Macbeth enticing him of things which could be greatness for him. Macbeth begins to internalize the words and sees a path to power forming. He is aided and abetted by the ambition of his wife, and before you know it the kingdom of Scotland is turned upside down as he seeks power destroying countless lives and ultimately bringing his demise. Greatness and ambition have their place and yet when it comes at the expense of others, we lose our place and our souls.

Macbeth is a tragic figure and is a warning for us. Lucky for James and John and the other disciples as well as us, we are given a warning and an example from our Lord. We are not to seek our own power or ways in which we can dominate others and the world. Instead, we are to trust in the mighty saving power of our Lord and act as humble servants in this world.

There are some things we do not have control over in our lives. We cannot choose certain things like where we were born, who our parents are, or how people are to act or respond to us. We even may face our fair share of Macbeths and Lady Macbeths, people so determined to have their way, they don't care who gets hurt in the process. If you haven't faced them, I am sure the time and day will come.

When we do though, we can know the path in front of us. We can make the choice to follow Jesus in his example and his love for all people. We can choose to make the difficult decision to not follow the norm and follow our convictions and our beliefs. We can choose to serve others instead of using power to dominate or hurt those around us. We can surrender to Jesus, trusting him to lead and direct our paths.

What is the danger in believing Jesus elevates certain people over others? How do we lose sight of Jesus' calling when we argue among ourselves who is greater or more right? Why

do you think Jesus wants us to focus on serving like him? Who are the people who hold us accountable in doing the right thing and making ethical decisions? When we face the Macbeths of this world, what can we do to honor our Lord?

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