

A RANSOM FOR MANY

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

36 “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

37 They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

38 “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

39 “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Winter was almost over. Jesus had led his disciples on a long journey on foot—from about the time we assign to his birthday in December until March. They traveled on the other side of the Jordan until, crossing the river at a ford that may have been the very one used by the Israelites led by Joshua to enter into the Promised Land, he re-entered the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants. It was just at this time, either right before or right after they crossed the river, that James and John, the sons of Zebedee and Salome,^a came to the Lord with this request. Matthew even tells us that it was their mother who asked, but Mark ignores that detail. Whoever said the words out loud, it was James and John who were doing the asking.

They asked two questions: First, that Jesus would do for them whatever they asked, and second, that he would let them set at his right and left hand when he came into his glory. If we spend our time wondering exactly what was wrong with this question, we will miss the point of the whole passage. For one thing, Jesus invites us to ask him for things. Also, he tells us that whatever we ask in his name, he will grant.

If they were only guilty of pride and an improper ambition, Jesus would have condemned them the way he condemns other people with pride and ambition like the Rich Young Man and others. But Jesus’ answer is this: “**You don’t know what you’re asking.**” They were ignorant, and that’s what he addresses.

^a “Sons of... Salome.” Compare Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40 and John 19:25. She was probably Jesus’ aunt & Mary’s sister.

Jesus uses words from the Old Testament to describe what was coming. “Cup” is used many times as a picture of God’s wrath and punishment, as in Jeremiah 25: **“This cup filled with the wine of my wrath.”** That’s not the cup of the Lord’s Supper that we drink, which is the cup of forgiveness, but the cup of suffering that Jesus had to drink in our place. The **baptism** Jesus talks about here is obviously not a washing for forgiveness but rather a scalding, agonizing punishment, not at all the baptism with which we are washed, but the punishment he underwent in our place. The difference between the **cup** and the **baptism** is the cup is drunk and the baptism is endured, so the one happens on the inside—suffering of the mind and spirit—and other happens on the outside—suffering of the body.

Since Jesus said that these would happen to James and John, we should also remember what happened to them. James underwent an agonizing baptism of suffering, executed by the Jews with a sword; the only apostle apart from Judas whose death is actually recorded in the Bible. John, who lived to be an old man, underwent an agonizing cup of suffering when he was exiled on the island of Patmos away from his church, his congregation in Ephesus.

Now that we’ve calmed ourselves down away from unnecessary blame against James and John, we need to listen to the way Jesus spoke to Peter, Judas, and the others when they became **indignant** with their companions. Since Jesus did not grant their request, we understand that they were upset that the brothers had made the request in the first place. There was an undercurrent among the Twelve that ran throughout Jesus’ ministry about which of them was the greatest.

Jesus’ response teaches us about what discipleship really means. It isn’t about having any rank or degree at all. It’s about getting to bottom of the social ladder, not the top. A disciple is a servant, not a master. And more than that, or less than that, a disciple should have the attitude of the slave.

Think of someone in the church with a position of authority. You don’t necessarily need to think of a pastor, but it could. But we could also think about a Circuit Pastor—the pastor to other pastors—or a District President, or in our schools, the Principal. They are men who are slaves to everyone around us. A slave cannot ignore a command or even a request from his master. If he does his life is in peril, not just his job, but his life. So it is with a called servant of the gospel who is in authority. He is enslaved to everyone who has a “quick question,” to every misunderstanding, every difference of opinion, every dispute—all of which must be handled by correctly dividing Law and Gospel, by showing love and compassion, by brushing away fatigue, exhaustion, and sometimes even poor health, and by speaking the truth in love. It means setting aside personal opinion, likes and dislikes, and getting to the truth. It means, with great fear and with profound respect for the Word of God, being willing to say that either God’s Word says this, or that while God’s Word doesn’t speak to a certain matter, the application of God’s Word says this.

What about you, who are not currently a pastor, a principal, a District President? You are still a disciple of Christ, a slave to all others. This is a special challenge to some, maybe to all. Here's where the Law of the Bible crashes down on our heads like a heavy hammer. Why do I need to be the one to be a slave to this or that sinful person?

Well, part of this is being placed where you are, when you are, with the people you're with. A new parent becomes a slave to a baby—to all of that baby's needs. I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, I'm wet, I'm sleepy and I don't realize it, I'm wet again, I just need to be held—don't hold me right now, I'm wet again. This is the slavery of two parents to a baby for a couple of years, especially the first year.

What does a slave do when the master is sick? The slave doesn't leave. The slave has to take care of the sick master, and usually without being told what to do. The slave, like the new parent, has to take care of all sorts of unmentionable things, things nobody else would want to do, but the slave does them.

You and I were served by Jesus Christ on the cross to scrub away the filth of our sins. He bore the agony, the cup of God's wrath, and he bore the pain, the baptism of fire and nails and blood and the whip, to be punished in our place. And like a slave, he did not open his mouth once to complain.

Through his pain, his suffering, his nails, his thorns, his death, our suffering is removed. We are forgiven. And he asks us not to bear the sins of other, but to serve them in their sinfulness, to bear with their scorn, and their curses, their violations of the Second and Eighth Commandments against us as they lie and create more lies about our motives and put words into our mouths, but we serve them and other another with the Gospel—so that they might come to repentance, to come to a knowledge of the truth.

I always knew for certain what God's goal is for the people I meet. It's that they might come to faith in Christ. My slavery to them is to serve them with my patience and my compassion. Jesus said that he came to give his life **as a ransom for many**. You and I are messengers of that miracle to the many. **No one** deserves to have a slave. **No one** deserves to have God's mercy and compassion. But God's desire for you and me is that we would willingly be slaves to the whole sinful mob, to teach them with our patience, our lives, our words, and perhaps even at the cost of our reputations and status and certainly at the cost of our pride—that Jesus came as **a ransom for many**—no matter who, and even me and you. Amen.