

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 53:4-12
SECOND LESSON: Mark 10:35-45
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“Status”

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Joe drank every day of his adult life. His wife Maggie put up with it. He lost jobs because of his drinking. He embarrassed his family because of his drinking. And finally, he destroyed his health because of his drinking. In the end Joe’s liver gave out and he passed away. As his family all stood somberly around the graveside an old friend attempted to comfort Maggie. “It’s a shame he never found Alcoholics Anonymous, Maggie,” he said. But instead of being comforted, she was highly offended.

“He wasn’t THAT bad!” she exclaimed.

De Nile (denial), so much more than a river in Egypt!

It is amazing how easily people see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear. James and John were part of the inner circle of apostles with Peter being the third member of the group. Yet they came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask,” Jesus patiently replied, “What do you want me to do for you?” They then responded, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” Not only had they just cut Peter out of the equation entirely, they seriously did not know what they were asking. But in order for us to really understand the insane nature of this request we have to consider the depth of their state of denial.

Jesus had been teaching for days and weeks that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He flat out told them he would be delivered up to the chief priests and scribes, who would then condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. The Gentiles will then mock him, spit on him, scourge him and kill him. **There was nothing subtle about this.** James and John had to work really hard to deliberately NOT SEE what was staring them in the face. What is it about human nature that refuses to see what is right in front of us?

I find myself asking this question a lot right now.

James and John truly excelled themselves in the denial department. It’s hard to know if we might have done the same. We all think we’re smart, but we can all get conned. We imagine ourselves to be objective, but none of us truly are. Humans have an amazing capacity for screening out inconvenient facts. And not only did James and John deny reality, in their ambition they were willing to sacrifice the third member of their group. What they were picturing was a throne room in which the king’s most trusted advisors would be placed on either side of the king, and all would defer respectfully to them.

It's possible that at some level James and John knew that what they were asking was outrageous, thus the initial, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." I don't think Jesus rolled his eyes, but I wouldn't blame him if he did. He patiently told them that they don't know what they are asking. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" he asked. And of course they answered, "We can," which of course was absolutely incorrect.

James and John were picturing Jesus as a king, and their role in the future kingdom. They did not understand that glory could have anything to do with suffering, sacrifice or weakness. And when we picture glory, we don't think of that either. When the Phillies lost and were out of the playoffs before they even started, no Philadelphia sports fan shouted, "That's glorious!" Glory is about winning. Glory is about victory and reward. But Jesus achieved glory for us by enduring the cross. He achieved glory, by losing his life.

Jesus told James and John that they would drink the cup and be baptized with the baptism, but anything more was not for him to grant. James ended up being martyred early on. John probably lived into old age in Ephesus, but neither had a life of ease and wealth. When the other apostles heard about their request right after it happened they were furious. But they didn't understand either. Jesus had to spell it out again. Leadership in the kingdom of God is not like leadership in the world. He 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. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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."

Our world is all about STATUS. Everything around us screams hierarchy. Some people are more important than *other* people. Some jobs are more important than *other* jobs. And we are being absolutely inundated right now with political ads for people who want powerful jobs. Many of these people are out for power itself, although all will go on to claim that they are public servants. And most of us are all too aware of the hypocrisy and corruption that infiltrates politics. But even though it is easy to see and reject in others, it is much harder to recognize it in ourselves. We all desire some kind of status, because status in society means security. Who doesn't want to be honored and respected?

James and John couldn't allow themselves to see what was really ahead, because it was hard. And the image of glory they had was worldly. They had spent their lives at the bottom of the social heap. The most natural thing in the world would be to fantasize about what it would be like to be at the top. Despite all that they had been through with Jesus, despite all they had seen and done, they were still focused on themselves. They wanted to win the Olympics without spending a single day in training.

Jesus pointed out that the way the Gentiles ruled was despotic. The NIV describes "those who are regarded as rulers." It was not a divine appointment. Men held positions of power based on their wealth, family connections, and who they had done favors for. Being devious and shrewd are attributes of

power. I always find it ironic that in history ruling classes are often referred to as “the nobility” when there is absolutely nothing noble about how they acquired their status. Usually it is the result of an exceptionally vicious ancestor who backed the right king. Leaders in any time and place have a tendency to lord it over others, to bully those who are weaker, to coerce and intimidate. A democracy, when it is functioning correctly, helps to mitigate some of the worst abuses, but constant vigilance is required.

God’s kingdom flips the script. In God’s kingdom whoever wants to become great must be a servant. The word is *diakonos*, from where we get “deacon.” But Jesus pushes the image even further, saying, if you want to be first, you must be the slave of all. This is something NO ONE wants to be. A slave had no rights whatsoever. And Jesus states it in such extreme terms to make a point. He is trying to get our attention and wake us up to the false standards we are surrounded by. We are to BE DIFFERENT.

Jesus went on to explain that while his example is the one we are to follow, he did, however, have a unique role. He said, “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.” We are to be servants, but only Jesus can serve as a ransom in God’s plan of salvation.

When we think of paying a ransom, we immediately think of kidnapping, but in this world it was the standard term used for freeing a prisoner or slave. Soldiers taken captive by an opposing army could be ransomed home if their government paid for their freedom. If their government did not care about them, they were either killed or sold on the slave market. Because Jesus’ death is a ransom, it is more than an inspiring role model for us. It actually does something. A payment has been made and we have been freed, but exactly how this happens he does not explain. This is why we have “theories” of atonement, not “certainties” of atonement. What we have are images for things that are really beyond our comprehension.

In the best-case scenario, business on this side of heaven is about self-advancement. Even the best of our leaders are me-centered, not God-centered. And even those who enter public service with good intentions are often pressed into compromises with the devil. But if WE serve God because we belong to God, we can step away from this false value system and bring about change in a different way. Christians are to be like yeast working in flour and water to create bread. Instead of exercising power over others, we experience the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us in a new way. And the paradox of the kingdom is that when we acknowledge in our hearts that we are God’s servants and slaves, we are of all people the most free. Amen.

Isaiah 53:4-12

⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.^[b]

⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes^[c] his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

¹¹ After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life^[d] and be satisfied^[e];
by his knowledge^[f] my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,^[g]
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,^[h]
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Mark 10:35-45

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.”