

Learn From Jesus

The Key to Greatness

Ever have one of those insensitive moments? I was six years old. We were still living in Wales and my mother took us to visit an aunt in London, who was being visited by a German friend. It was less than twenty years after World War 2. Friendly conversation was happening, when suddenly I blurted out, "How come you're here when you were fighting us during the war?"

In this message in the series *Learn From Jesus*, we're looking at the topic of The Key to Greatness.

Mark 10:35-45

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it is prepared." And when the ten heard *it*, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John. But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

There are some powerful truths that we learn from this passage of Scripture.

1. Some of us aren't naturally sensitive

That's why I told that little story before.

But thankfully, Jesus still loves us even in our insensitivity.

I'm talking about one of those moments where you say something, suddenly there's silence where everyone stares at you and you look around innocently and say, "Wot?"

But there's hope for us, because that's how some of the disciples started out too.

To understand what I'm talking about, think about the context of our Bible reading.

Mark 10:33-34

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.

That's Jesus speaking and it's the two verses immediately before our Bible passage.

Jesus had just predicted that He will be betrayed, condemned, mocked, scourged and executed.

And James and John say, "Yeah, whatever. So we were wondering if we could sit at your right hand and your left hand in Your glory?"

Not exactly sensitive.

In fact, I'm amazed that Jesus didn't smack them across the back of the head; I sure would have!

But that's not what Jesus is like.

But these same men who Jesus called "sons of thunder", who offered to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritans, who were so insensitive to what He had just told them, these same men were part of Jesus' inner circle of three, chosen to witness His transfiguration on the mountain, to accompany Him when He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, to whom He poured out His heart in Gethsemane.

Then out of the three, John became the disciple "whom Jesus loved."

Just as well that God is a forgiving God, otherwise those guys would have been in trouble.

2. Don't make open-ended promises

We see this in movies all the time: I promise I'll catch the guy who killed your brother.

Maybe in scriptwriting se can make a promise like that and the scriptwriter can make sure it happens.

But that's not how things are in real life.

All you can do is promise you'll do your best.

People so often get entangled by their own tongues by making rash promises – hung by the tongue as someone once called their book.

An example of this was when Israel was attacked by the Ammonites.

Judges 11:30-31

And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

That was a very foolish thing to promise God, and it was to have grave repercussions for Jephthah's daughter.

But Jesus doesn't promise anything to James and John; first He wants to hear what they want.

So even though they come to Him with an open-ended question asking Him to do whatever they ask, He wants to find out what He's agreeing to before He commits Himself.

That's smart.

Don't make promises you don't know you can fulfil; don't agree to something without knowing fully what you're agreeing to.

Not think of what's happening here.

Jesus is now faced with two confident, ambitious young men.

And their request is simple: In Your glory, we want to sit, one on Your left hand and the other on Your right hand.

Wow! I mean, that's some request.

Jesus said, "You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptised with the baptism I'm baptised with?"

I reckon they looked at each other: I have no idea what that means, but hey, what the heck. Why not?

And with all the confidence of youth, they said, "Sure, we can do that."

I wonder if they could feel those ten pairs of eyes boring into them.

And I wonder if Jesus looked at them, smiled, & thought, "You guys have no clue what you're signing up for."

The cup was the cup of death, the baptism was the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

But James and John are up for it, and Jesus confirms that they will in fact drink His cup and be baptised with His baptism.

3. Ambition isn't necessarily a bad thing

How do we know this?

Jesus didn't rebuke them for their ambition or their confidence.

The other ten disciples were annoyed.

There were probably thinking, "Who do they think they are? Do they think they're better than we are? Couple of bigshots."

In fact, they probably wished they'd thought of it first.

It's easy to be judgmental, especially when others are successful.

We call this Tall Poppy Syndrome.

Here in Australia, we get behind the underdog: You can do it, you've got what it takes, we're right behind you.

Until they get there, then it's a different story.

The Tall Poppy Syndrome has been around a long time.

But the Bible doesn't condemn ambition, nor did Jesus.

Philippians 2:3

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition...

It's not ambition that's the problem; it's selfish ambition.

The great thing about James and John is that their ambition did not relate to this life, but to the next.

They weren't asking for a happy life, lots of money, fame, greatness, an awesome career.

They were looking for something in the next life.

God can work with that.

Because in amongst all the stuff they didn't understand, they understood that what really counts is the next life.

And that's where their ambition was.

I've got ambitions: I want to be the best man of God I can be; I want to be best husband and father I can be; for this to be best church; I want to use my giftings to glory of God; I want to win people to Christ.

Things that have eternal value.

And I want a big reward in heaven.

How is any of that wrong?

4. The key to greatness

Jesus explained to all (including the other ten disciples) how to become great.

Remember, we're not talking about greatness in this life.

Ultimately, greatness in this life has no real value.

When John Wesley saw King George II in the House of Lords in 1755, he wrote, "His brow was much furrowed with age, and quite clouded with care. And is this all the world can give even to a king? All the grandeur it can afford? A blanket of ermine round his shoulders, so heavy and cumbersome he can scarce move under it! A huge heap of borrowed hair, with a few plates of gold and glittering stones upon his head! Alas, what a bauble is human greatness!"

George Harrison, talking about his days in the Beatles said, "After the initial excitement and thrill had worn off, I, for one, became depressed. Is this all we have to look forward to in life? Being chased around by a crowd of hooting lunatics from one rubbish hotel room to the next?"

This world really doesn't have that much to offer: what really counts is the next life.

Greatness there will actually count for something.

Jesus taught us the way to true greatness.

Greatness in the Kingdom is eternal, whereas this world is fleeting, temporary.

How to be great in the eternal Kingdom can be summed up by this: the way up is the way down.

The Kingdom is so opposite to how the world functions.

The world says, "Look out for No. 1. Take what you want. Get it while you can."

But the Kingdom says, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first. If you want to be great, become a slave. Esteem others as better than yourself."

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be great in God's Kingdom.

But Jesus says, "If that's what you really want, this is the way to get it: become everyone's servant."