

In spite of the fact that Jesus has been teaching them about the suffering and death that He must soon endure, the disciples seem oblivious and were focused on establishing their positions in Christ's future kingdom. When two of the disciples ask for the highest positions of honor, Jesus must stress to them that greatness in His kingdom is not about exalting oneself but about serving others.

**Verses 1-34:** Jesus has made His way into the edge of Judea on the eastern side of the Jordan river and has begun teaching the people there. The Pharisees came to Him to tempt Him by asking if it was legal for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus replied that although the Mosaic law allowed for divorce, it was God's intention that marriage be for life. Divorce was only part of the Mosaic Law because the sinful hearts of men and women prevented some couples from remaining married for life. When parents brought their little children to Jesus for Him to bless them, the disciples became annoyed. However, Jesus pointed out that we all have to come to God with the same trust that a child has. Later, a rich young ruler comes to Jesus to discover what he needed to do to have eternal life, but he was unwilling to part with his material possessions in order to follow Jesus. As Jesus and His disciples begin traveling toward Jerusalem, He begins telling them more about the suffering He will have to endure at the hands of the chief priests and scribes and His eventual death and resurrection.

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35 And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldst do for us whatsoever we shall desire. 36 And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you? 37 They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory.

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This request of James and John demonstrates that they (along with the rest of the disciples) did not understand at all what God's will for Jesus was to be. They ignored Jesus talking of His upcoming suffering and death and instead are concerned with their future positions in the kingdom of God. Apparently James and John thought that they could get a jump ahead of the other disciples and lock in their positions in early. Mark indicates that it was James and John making the request, but Matthew expands on the conversation and tells us that it was their mother who initiated the request, likely at her sons' behest (**Matt. 20:20-21** "*Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom*"). Sitting on the left and right hands of Jesus on His throne were positions of the highest honor and the two brothers wanted those positions.

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38 But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?

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**"But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask"** – Jesus states that they do not understand the things concerning the kingdom of God. Their request was rooted in their own selfish desire for glory and honor and not for the glory of God. They did not understand what was required to be worthy to sit on the left and right hand of Jesus in the kingdom.

**"can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?"** – This cup is apparently the one that represented the suffering and death that He would have to endure (**Matt. 26:39, 42** "*And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt ... He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done*").

**"and be baptized [to immerse; to submerge; to be overwhelmed] with the baptism that I am baptized with?"** – The root meaning of baptism refers to be immersed in something so that it totally overwhelms the item, such as when baptized in water – The water overwhelms you so that you are totally wet. Jesus is talking of being "baptized" in the suffering that is to come, immersed to the point that it results in His death. He is asking James and John if they are able to endure the suffering and death that He is going to endure.

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39 And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized:

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**"And they said unto him, We can"** – They obviously do not understand what they are saying. They have their sights set on positions of glory and honor in Christ's earthly kingdom and have not comprehended the extent of the suffering that Jesus has been telling them He must endure.

**"And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized"** – They have confidently (and ignorantly) stated that they can drink the cup that Jesus will drink and go through the same baptism as He, and Jesus agrees that they will indeed have to endure these things. They will suffer for the sake of Jesus as well as die for Him, although it will not accomplish the same thing in them. Jesus would suffer and die for the sins of the world, while the disciples would have to suffer and die for being witnesses of Christ.

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40 But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but *it shall be given to them* for whom it is prepared.

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**"But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give"** – It is surprising to hear Jesus say that something is not His to give, but two possible explanations present themselves: 1) Jesus, living as a human being on earth in submission to His Father, has left the choice of who will occupy such positions of honor to His Father; 2) the choice of who will occupy positions of honor in the kingdom has already been made and thus Jesus is not at liberty to give such positions of honor to whomever might ask for them since that choice is based on the sovereign will of God.

**"but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared"** – This statement, particularly in light of Matthew's addition of "of my Father" to this statement (Matt. 20:23b), seems to support the idea that these positions of honor are not available simply for the asking because the Father has already chosen who will occupy them based on His own sovereign will.

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41 And when the ten heard *it*, they began to be much displeased with James and John.

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The Greek word translated “much displeased” means “to be indignant.” When the other ten disciples discovered what James and John were asking Jesus to do for them, they became very angry with the two brothers. As one commentator put it, it was not righteous indignation but resentment against the two for attempting to gain an advantage over the rest of the disciples. The disciples had already been arguing over who would be greatest in the kingdom (Mar 9:33-34) and the desire for honor and prestige had obviously motivated these two brothers to seek it directly from Jesus.

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42 But Jesus called them *to him*, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them.

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**“But Jesus called them *to him*”** – Earlier when the disciples had disputed among themselves over the question of who would be greatest among them, they did not want to admit to Jesus that they had done so (**Mark. 9:33-34** “*And he came to Capernaum: and being in the house he asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest*”). When the ten had become “much displeased” with James and John (v. 41), they apparently began arguing among themselves apart from Jesus so that He would again not be aware of their selfish dispute. Now Jesus calls them to Himself so that He can talk with them.

**“and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted [to consider; to recognize] to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship [to put or keep in subjection] over them”** – Those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles (kings, governors, etc.) exercise their authority by forcing obedience upon their subjects. They are in charge and they want everyone to know it. Jesus is pointing out that the disciples are well aware of this fact.

**“and their great ones [high in rank] exercise authority [wield power] upon them”** – The Gentile rulers who are high in rank enforce their authority by arresting and punishing those who disobey. Their decrees are requirements, not suggestions or requests.

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43 But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: 44 And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.

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**“But so shall it not be among you”** – God’s kingdom does not follow the pattern of the world’s kingdoms where the higher your rank is, the more power and authority you are to wield over a larger population. Greatness in God’s kingdom is based on love rather than who you can boss around.

**“but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister”** – “Whosoever will be great” can be rephrased as “whosoever desires to be great.” Anyone who wants to be great in God’s kingdom must be willing to serve others. Jesus does not measure greatness by the authority that you have to cause people serve you but by your willingness to serve others.

**“And whosoever of you will be the chiefest [highest in rank], shall be servant [slave] of all”** – Anyone who wants to have the highest rank in the kingdom should be ready to be the slave of all. This view of greatness is the exact opposite of the world’s view. According to the world, a ruler’s greatness is measured by the size of your “kingdom” (the number of people you rule over). In the kingdom of God, greatness is measured by how many people you serve by placing their needs above your own.

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45 For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

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Jesus Himself, Who is the Son of God and the Christ (Messiah), even as the ruler over the kingdom of God, did not come into the world in order to be served by the population of the world. As a good king, He came to serve those under His rule. In scripture, God’s purpose of kings and other rulers are to act as shepherds, taking care of their people. The kings of the world, however, tend to operate under the premise that the people are there to serve them. This premise does not describe Jesus’ kingdom, for, as He said, He came to serve His people and to give Himself to redeem them from their sins.