

## What Does Serving God Look Like

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who opens our eyes to the love of God, our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, amen.

Back when I was in the Air Force, just by virtue of my rank and the position I held in our squadron I was one of only 8 or 9 officers among over 300 enlisted members. I was pretty ambitious back then. I did my job well and when opportunities came, I was usually the first to volunteer. When an issue arose that needed to be solved, we would brainstorm ideas. I usually had the farthest out ideas. At the time our Commander appreciated my outside the box ideas. He always said he would rather have an officer he had to reign in every once in a while than one you had to jump start. I always knew there was a line between blind ambition and doing a good job and trying to get ahead. I think that's why Jesus doesn't rebuke James and John (**SLIDE**) when they made their outlandish request to be at Jesus' right and left hands when he came into his kingdom. They were ambitious, and Jesus knew he would have to reign them in, but at least they had high goals and knew what they wanted.

Their requests for the seats next to Jesus suggest these two disciples are vying for the two top positions of power. Perhaps they also had another ulterior motive. Maybe they actually did love Jesus and wanted nothing more than to be near him even if it meant being baptized into a death like his. A person willing to undergo suffering and even death to be a follower of Jesus is more than an admirer.

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They are more than fans. I mean I love the Browns, (SLIDE) but I'm not giving up my life to follow them into another losing season. I'm not even going to give up very much money either... I'll watch them on TV and maybe try to go and see a game, but if it involves hardship or peril, I'm out. Not James and John. They said they were able to drink from the same cup of suffering that Jesus was facing. By the way, (SLIDE) James was martyred in Jerusalem by Nero and John survived him only to be exiled to Patmos, where he had the Revelation that became the last Book of the Bible. So, indeed they both walked the walk of faith all the way to their own ends.

This particular passage is the final ministry of Jesus before entering into Jerusalem in Mark's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples have been on the road for quite a while. (SLIDE) As our scripture text for today begins, Jesus reveals for the third time how he will be handed over, mocked, beaten, and killed in Jerusalem, but that he will rise again on the third day. Mark tells us those who followed Jesus were amazed and afraid. Perhaps Jesus was walking ahead of them for that very reason. He was trying to put a little distance between them so they wouldn't try to talk him out of what God had planned. Peter had already tried to do just that after the first of Jesus' passion predictions. Jesus tries one last time before entering Jerusalem to get his disciples to finally understand what following Him really means. Instead of even trying to understand, James and John blurt out whatever is

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on their tongues without any filter, “Jesus make us your favorites.” They say... That of course set off a chain reaction of anger between all the rest of the disciples. Imagine Jesus in a fair amount of distress over what he knows is about to happen and all these earthly minded skulls full of mush can muster is yet another argument over who’s going to be greatest. What follows is Jesus trying to get them to understand about becoming a servant in the Kingdom of God. He explains that leaders in God’s Realm don’t lord it over all the rest, but serve those in need. If you want to know what Jesus means, all you have to do is look at what he does. Jesus modeled everything he taught. If he says feed my sheep, he actually feeds the multitudes. If he says take care of the sick, he heals even on the Sabbath. Jesus shows us by his own actions how to live under the rule of God’s Kingdom. The trouble is the disciples are too blind to see what Jesus is trying to teach them.

One reason Mark’s Gospel is my favorite is because it’s been called the most Lutheran Book in the Bible. (SLIDE) When you think about the way Mark depicts the disciples, they start out clueless and seem to never get any better, only worse and worse. In the other Gospels the disciples start out really bad, but tend to at least begin to understand some of what Jesus teaches. Not so in Mark. Here’s what I mean. In the story where Jesus falls asleep in the boat during a bad storm and the disciples wake him up very afraid that they were all going to die. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus stills the storm and then says to the disciples, “Have you still

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*no faith?*” In Matthew, Jesus says “You of *little faith.*” In Luke, Jesus says, “*Where is your faith?*” At least in Matthew they have a little faith and in Luke they must have some faith if Jesus asks where it is. They have no faith in Mark’s version and they never get any either. Even after the resurrection when the men in white instruct the women to go and tell the other disciples Jesus has risen, Mark tells us they left and said nothing to anybody because they were afraid. In Mark’s Gospel the disciples are never redeemed by their own behavior. For Mark, the only thing the disciples have going for them is the fact that Jesus picked them and Jesus loved them. Maybe they did have some redeeming values, but Mark doesn’t record them. I believe it’s much the same with us. If Jesus were beside me telling me how he was about to die, I’d probably not be too much different. So, before we ever get too critical on those who first walked the walk of faith, lets be honest about our own discipleship walk with Jesus. We really don’t have much going for us either, except for the fact that Jesus loves us and Jesus picks us.

To further his point about the disciples not understanding what following Jesus was all about, Mark uses a literary device called an *inclusio*. An *inclusio* is where an author brackets a narrative story with two very similar stories that illustrate the major idea within the brackets. In this case, Mark brackets all three of the times when Jesus predicts his passion, death, and resurrection to his disciples, with stories of blind people who are healed by Jesus and who then can actually,

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physically see. In doing this, Mark highlights the spiritual blindness of the disciples while the two men gain their real, physical eyesight.

I started out by suggesting a little ambition might not be a bad thing, but I will tell you that too much or blind ambition is bad. If the desire to be numero uno drives you to cheat or to steal from someone else, then you've gone too far. Ambition can easily sneak over the line into greed and self-destruction. I'm pretty sure you can't be too ambitious when it comes to serving others. I don't play tennis, but back in the day I played a bit of Racquetball and I think the saying applies to both. Life is like a game of Tennis (Racquetball). Those who don't serve well end up losing... (SLIDE)

We do a fair bit of serving around this place. Some of you are serving in some capacity almost every day around here. Most of you serve without ever seeking, needing, or even wanting any credit--let alone to be the first or best. Most of your serving goes unrecognized. I mean unrecognized in the sense that you never get an award or even a public thank you. Here's just a small sample of the stuff I'm talking about. Someone cleans the kitchen floor on her hands and knees and doesn't want others to know. Someone comes in early and makes sure all the lights are on and the doors unlocked before anyone else gets here. Someone stays late to make sure all those lights are off and all those doors are locked. Someone fills the candles with oil to make sure we have a beautifully lit Sanctuary.

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Someone trims all the shrubbery around the building. Someone bakes our communion bread and another someone makes sure we have plenty of wine. The list goes on and on. One day I want to have a Sunday where we recognize all those who we used to call back in my Air Force days the “Unsung Heroes.” Serving is a way of life around here and my strong belief is that it is not done to receive glory or notoriety.

Poor James and John. (SLIDE) They get a bad rap for wanting to be at the right- and left-hand side of Jesus. We always assume it’s for all the wrong reasons. What if the reason they wanted to be at the right and left of Jesus was simply because they loved him so much. I wish I loved Jesus that much. I hope I can learn to love Jesus that much. May we learn from Jesus to love well and to serve well. Amen.