

# JESUS' LEFT AND RIGHT

Mark 10:32-45

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 21, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 10, verses 32 through 45. In this gospel lesson, two disciples ask for something really awful, and, graciously, Jesus doesn't give it to them. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 10, beginning at verse 32, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>32</sup> And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, <sup>33</sup> saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. <sup>34</sup> And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”

<sup>35</sup> And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” <sup>36</sup> And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” <sup>37</sup> And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” <sup>38</sup> Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” <sup>39</sup> And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, <sup>40</sup> but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” <sup>41</sup> And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. <sup>42</sup> And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup> But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Dear Logan,

Today you are baptized into the king of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ. He possesses all authority. And he uses that authority, not for his own benefit, but for yours.

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Imagine you have a friend with all authority. And I'm not talking about something pretty big here, like the CEO of a large corporation or the President of the United States. The CEO has to answer to the board, and his success is dependent on the competition and the strength of the markets. He does not have authority over these things. The President has to work with congress,

and the courts can check their work. There are limits, as well, to his authority. I'm talking real authority. Whatever this guy says goes, real "king of the world" stuff here.

That's what James and John saw in Jesus. They had seen him heal diseases and cast out demons. He has authority over illness and the unseen forces of evil. They had seen him calm a storm and walk on water. He has authority over the weather. They had seen him feed thousands with a few loaves of bread and two fish. He has authority over the material of this universe. And they, along with just one other disciple, Peter, were privy to his transfiguration, where his clothing and appearance became dazzling white as he shone with the glory of God. They found themselves in the inner circle of the one who truly has all authority. So what do they do? They try to lock it down.

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The Bible can be quite funny. And this is one of those passages, but in a dark sort of way.

A few weeks ago, when we were in Mark 8:(27-38), we heard Jesus predict his own death. "He began to teach [his disciples] that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). That was a turning point in *The Gospel of Mark*. It was the point where Jesus began to focus his teaching on the necessity of the cross. Up until that point, the focus was on Jesus' identity. His miracles and teachings revealed Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God in human flesh. But that conversation was the point where Jesus' teaching shifted from his identity to his mission, which is his death and resurrection. That was the first of three almost identical conversations about Jesus' mission to suffer, die, and rise again.

The second one occurred in Mark 9:30-32. Jesus basically just said the same thing he did in Mark 8, but the text adds the detail that the disciples did not understand what he was saying, even though the words themselves were very clear.

And then we get the third passion prediction in today's reading.

This conversation takes place while they were on the road to Jerusalem. If you peek ahead just a bit, you'll notice that the Triumphal Entry is just ahead of them in chapter 11. So this seems to be just a couple days before Palm Sunday. And this puts us within about a week of Jesus' crucifixion. And in this passion prediction, Jesus becomes very specific. Previously, Jesus had talked about the elders, chief priests, and scribes rejecting him (8:31), but he didn't say who would actually do the killing. But here Jesus specifies that it will be the Gentiles (10:33). The leaders of the Jews will condemn him to death, and then they will hand him over to the Gentiles—that is, the Roman authorities—and then **"they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him"** (10:34). This is most shameful. This is the worst of both worlds. He is rejected by the Jews and defiled by the Gentiles.

I mean, suppose you have a hero, and that hero gets humiliated and disgraced. What would be worse: for your hero to be betrayed by his own people, or for him to be destroyed by the enemies on the other side? I don't really know which of the two is worse, but what is, most certainly worse, is for both of them to happen. And that's what Jesus says will happen to him. The rulers of the Jews will condemn him and hand him over to the Romans to have him killed.

The disciples had a hard time accepting this. Even though it ends with Jesus rising from the dead, they couldn't get past the whole death thing. Maybe the stuff about Jesus being rejected by the leaders of the Jews and also defiled by the Gentiles was just too much for them. Maybe they just didn't believe Jesus when he said he would rise again. They could not believe that any of this was good, and they could not believe this would actually happen to Jesus. Right up until the point when it all goes down, the disciples seem to be in perpetual denial about it.

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We see this when two of the disciples—James and John—come up to Jesus and basically act like that conversation never even happened. They say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (10:35). Now this is a really terrible way to start a conversation. Try this when you go to work tomorrow. Walk into your boss’ office and say, “Boss man, I want you to do whatever I ask of you,” and see how that goes. But Jesus is actually patient with these two brothers, and he decides to play along. He says, **“What do you want me to do for you?”** (10:36). And they say, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (10:37).

In a roundabout way, Jesus denies their request. But he doesn’t come right out and say, “No.” He recognizes that they still don’t understand what he must do, and they still have a distorted view of Jesus’ glory. So he says, **“You do not know what you are asking”** (10:38).

And this is the part of the text that I find most humorous. It’s also the key to understanding the text. So I want you to pay attention to this: What did James and John think they were asking for? And what were they *really* asking for? Because whatever they thought they were asking for was not what Jesus had in mind.

So paint the picture in your mind. What were James and John thinking of when they asked to sit on Jesus’ right and left in his glory? If they were thinking in earthly terms, perhaps it’s a picture of thrones, or at least positions of authority when Jesus becomes king in Jerusalem. Or if they were thinking in heavenly terms, then it’s basically the same picture, except it’s in the New Jerusalem instead of the old Jerusalem. It’s the same thing, just on a larger scale. Whether it’s an earthly or a heavenly image, it’s a picture of power, authority, gold, and fancy robes. This is what James and John think they are asking for. But Jesus says, **“You do not know what you are asking.”** The picture in Jesus’ mind is apparently much different. So what image does Jesus have in his mind?

The Bible actually gives us this image. It describes for us Jesus in the height of his glory. And in this picture of Jesus in his glory, there is a person on his right, and there is a person on his left. Do you know who they are? Can you see the image in your head? Think of the person on the right, and think of the person on the left. Are they James and John? No; it’s two other guys. We know that John, at least, was standing nearby (John 19:26), looking at this sight, but he was not actually in the picture, and I think he was a bit relieved to not be in this picture. He watched as two other guys were on Jesus’ right and on his left in this image of glory. Can you see this picture now? If you can’t see it yet, let me help you out: “And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left” (15:28).

Mark writes his gospel in such a way, he paints the mental picture of the crucifixion in such a way, that it reminds us of this request. And by doing this, he drives home the point that the cross is the pinnacle of Jesus’ glory.

That might not have been the picture you painted in your mind earlier. It certainly wasn’t the image James and John expected. It’s more gory than glorious. But this is Jesus’ image of glory. When we consider the verses around James and John’s request, it becomes quite clear that Jesus is thinking of the cross. So when these two disciples come and ask, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory,” Jesus is quite right when he says, **“You do not know what you are asking.”** They had no idea what they were really asking for. The places on Jesus’ right and left had been prepared for thieves. James and John thought they were asking for positions of power, authority, influence, and respect. But they were really asking for death. That’s the joke. It’s kind of dark.

So Jesus asked them, **“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”** (10:38). Jesus is talking about his suffering. He’s not talking

about a cup of gold, but a cup of suffering. And he uses the term “baptism” in a figurative way to refer to his death—kind of like a baptism by fire. James and John answered that they could do this, though they still didn't know what they were really talking about. And Jesus actually affirmed their answer. They would suffer, much like their Lord suffered. Just as the cross marked their teacher, it would also become the mark of the disciples. But it would still not be James and John next to Jesus in his glory. And it's not Jesus who would appoint the persons on his right and left. That decision was left up to a man by the name of Pontius Pilate, who sentenced these thieves, along with Jesus, to be crucified until they are dead.

This is what Jesus was trying to talk about with his disciples. But they didn't get it, none of them did. So the other ten, when they heard what James and John asked for, “began to be indignant at James and John” (10:41). We would be indignant too. *Who do these guys think they are? Do they think they're more important than me?*

We see here that it's really all twelve of the disciples who were in the wrong. It's really all twelve of them who wanted the positions of glory, but they just didn't get it.

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It's interesting that the gospels often portray the disciples negatively. This is one of the many “marks of authenticity.” Scholars call it the “criteria of embarrassment.” An account is more likely to be true when the author portrays himself or his own group in an embarrassing way. It indicates honesty. Now Mark wasn't among the twelve, so he wasn't there when this went down, but these guys were his friends, and it had to be one of the twelve who reported this encounter to him, probably Peter.

We commit the same sin James and John committed. We still have this same distorted view of Jesus' glory. We still think of glory in worldly terms, rather than the terms Jesus sets for it.

Sometimes Christians are too quick to get to Easter. We skip over the cross too quickly. We do this liturgically if we think of Lent as a necessary evil or maybe just as a means of getting to Easter. But even more so we do this in how we think of the Christian life. The “Victorious Christian Life” is far more appealing than a life of suffering marked by the cross. But only one of these is actually something Jesus calls us to, and it's not the “Victorious Christian Life.” Jesus has not really called us to be victorious. But he has called us to be faithful and even to suffer. We like the Jesus revealed in the glory of this world instead of the Jesus revealed in the glory of the cross. Now, the resurrection of Jesus is certainly good. We can't be saved without it. Let's not diminish the Resurrection of our Lord. But Jesus desires to be known in terms of the cross.

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The height of Jesus' glory was that most cursed day when the only people who knelt before him were those who knelt in mockery (15:19). It's the day he was anointed with spit (15:19). It's the day he wore a crown of thorns (15:17). It's the day his throne was an ugly wooden pole used to execute criminals. And those honored with the privilege of his right and left hands were other condemned criminals. One of those criminals saw the glory of it all, while the other only saw the shame (Luke 23:39-43).

I know this sounds totally backward. I mean, why is the cross the height of Jesus' glory? It is because, in the Kingdom of God, **“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”** (10:43-45). The cross is the height of Jesus' glory because service is the greatest virtue in the Kingdom of God.

The God of the universe—the creator of all things—has come among us. And he came not to be served. He came not to receive our praises. He came not to be glorified by men. He came to

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be rejected by men. And in this act of extreme self-sacrifice, he manifests his glory in the most unexpected way. He “**came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**”

While James and John, and you and me go about seeking some way to glorify ourselves, the one person who is worthy of all glory comes to be shamed. And he comes to be humiliated in our place. I mean, the just thing to do with someone who is unnecessarily proud is to humble them. But that's not how Jesus treats us. Instead, he humbled himself in our place. He accepted the rejection. He accepted the condemnation of death. He endured the mockery, the spit, the flogging, and even the cross.

That was the ransom. That was the payment on our behalf to redeem us from the sentence of death. He has given his life as a ransom for the many. This shameful sight is the height his glory. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.