

GREATNESS THROUGH SERVICE

Okay, people, listen up. I have some very important advice for you that I hope you'll take to heart. And it's this:

If anyone, even someone you know well and love very much, ever comes up to you and says, "I want you to do for me anything I ask," beware!

It's a set-up.

And you can pretty much bet your bottom dollar that whatever it is that person wants you to do will be something you normally wouldn't do for them in a million years.

But you already knew that, right?

I mean, it's pretty obvious that if someone asks you to commit to saying "yes" to something before you even know what it is you're saying "yes" to, it's going to be one whopper of a request.

So, proceed with caution. And write this down so you won't forget. The rule is, never say "yes" to anything before you know what it is you're saying "yes" to.

That's just plain, simple, common sense.

And Jesus, as you know, had a lot of common sense. So when two of his disciples, the Zebedee brothers, James and John, came up to him one day and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask," a red flag must have popped up in Jesus' mind.

I can imagine our Lord thinking, "Uh-oh, I wonder what J and J are up to this time."

Wisely, Jesus didn't agree to their terms. He refused to be blindsided. Jesus wanted to hear James and John's request before saying "Yes" to it.

Or "No," if necessary.

It was good that Jesus played it smart and wanted a little more information before responding.

“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

“Oh, not much, Lord. Just one itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny little thing.”

“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

Notice, if you will, the words, “in your glory.”

As if glory was what following Jesus and being a disciple of his was all about.

James and John wanted to rule beside Jesus. They wanted to wield power over others as princes when Christ ruled God’s Kingdom on earth.

They wanted the respect, the admiration, and the esteem that came with being high-ranking advisors in the cabinet of the Messiah.

“Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

Boy, did they have it wrong. Completely. Absolutely. Foolishly. Naïvely. Wrong.

James and John’s misunderstanding must have caused Jesus to shake his head in exasperation.

“Three whole years they’ve been with me, and that’s what they’ve gotten out of it? That’s what they think my ministry is about? Glory? Come on, guys!”

Or, as Jesus put it to them, “You don’t know what you are asking.”

Indeed they didn’t. But it wasn’t for lack of trying on Jesus’ part.

Before James and John made their rather brazen, presumptuous request, on at least three occasions our Lord made it clear to his disciples—including the Zebedee brothers—that he was going to be betrayed, undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the religious elite. Then he would be killed.

What part of betrayal, suffering, rejection and killing didn’t James and John understand?

How could they mistake those terrible things for glory?

Were they not listening to their Teacher?

Was what Jesus saying to them just not sinking in?

Didn’t they trust or believe what Jesus was telling them?

Or perhaps it was it a case of self-imposed, selective deafness. They just didn’t want to hear about the suffering and pain in Jesus’ future. Instead, they wanted to hear about all the fun stuff about what Jesus the Messiah would do.

Things like putting the Romans in their place and driving them out of the Jewish homeland.

And imposing God's justice on the bad guys who were causing the world so much heartbreak and agony: pronouncing judgment on them and raining fire and brimstone down on their heads.

And don't forget about living in the lap of luxury, just like King Herod and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, lived.

How wrong James and John were. How totally and completely mistaken their ideas were about Jesus and his Messiahship and glory.

Jesus threw cold water on their hopes and dreams when he said that none of them understood what it was to be a ruler in God's realm. Their concept of what a genuine ruler did was flawed, mistaken.

In this world, said Jesus, a ruler ruled by telling others how they could serve him (or her).

But in God's realm, a ruler ruled by asking others, "How can I serve you?" "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."

In other words, Jesus was saying that genuine greatness and glory comes through service to others. And if you want to be number one? That's easy.

Just become a slave to all people. The secret to being first in God's book was to always put others' needs and desires ahead of your own.

Jesus himself was an example of this kind of greatness and glory, coming into the world "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

George Bernard Shaw once wrote about what a meaningful life was:

"This is the true joy in life . . . being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; . . . being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; . . . being a force of nature [on behalf of others] instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

And I've shared before how Martin Luther King, Jr. once said in a sermon, "Everybody can be great . . . because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

Those ideas concerning greatness are very different than the world's. In fact, their polar opposites.

For Jesus, George Bernard Shaw and Martin Luther King, Jr. it's not how much we have, but how much we give.

It's not how many people we rule over and are served by, but how many people we serve so their lives can be better.

It's not having servants to tend to our needs and desires, but placing our needs and desires aside and serving those around us.

And Jesus didn't merely tell us that true greatness came through service to others.

Jesus showed us by his example, by the way he lived his own life.

Jesus did it first.

Service is the way to greatness in the Kingdom of God because it's the way Jesus traveled. He served, and we follow his lead.

Christ lived the way of greatness through service, and we emulate it.

"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. . . ."

And we, Jesus' followers, are called to do likewise.

May God bless and guide our efforts to do great things in the world through humble service to others. Amen.