

A REQUEST DENIED

Matthew 20:20-28; James 4:3

Intro: This story is recorded twice in the Gospels, here, and in Mark 10: 35-45. The chief difference between the two is that in Matthew's account we have the mother of James and John making the request for them, while in Mark's account James and John are the one who approached the Lord with their request.

If we read Matthew's account carefully we will notice that although the mother of James and John made the request, the Lord in answering spoke directly to James and John. In verse 22 the Lord said, "Ye ... " This is plural. And at the end of the verse we find that James and John answered the Lord's question because we read, "**They** say unto him, **We** are able."

So it seems that it must have originally been the desire of James and John, but that they got their mother involved in it thinking, possibly, that she would have a greater influence on the Lord than they would. So Mark presented the request as coming from James and John (which they may also have given after their mother introduced the subject); Matthew lets us know that their mother was sympathetic with what her sons wanted the Lord to do for them.

Some feel that the mother of James and John was the Salome who ministered so faithfully to the Lord, and that she may have been related to Mary, the mother of our Lord. But I won't spend time on that because I don't think that the evidence is clear. However, it is interesting to think that this was true.

The first thing that I think that we should consider is:

I. THE REQUEST, AND THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE REQUEST (Matt. 20:20, 21).

The request was that they wanted to sit on the Lord's right hand and on His left hand when He came into His kingdom.

Were James and John motivated by pride, or was their devotion to the Lord such that they were motivated to want to be near the Lord when He established His kingdom?

I don't know if we can definitely decide which was the case, but we can see that the Lord rebuked them for their ignorance, not for their motive.

And yet, at the same time, it appears that they asked the Lord for this privilege when they had the Lord alone. It was later that the ten other disciples found out what James and John had done. See Matt. 20:24. So this would indicate that their hearts were not quite right in making such a request of the Lord. Prior to this the Lord had taught much about the importance of humility, and it would seem that James and John were overlooking what the Lord had taught them before.

Not only that, but there had to be a certain lack of sensitivity to what the Lord had been saying to them. Look at Matt. 20:17-19. The Lord had just spoken to the whole group of disciples about His approaching death and the sufferings which would precede it. Matthew Henry suggested that it may have been our Lord's reference to His resurrection that made James and John think about the kingdom, but, again, that is only a suggestion.

It seems that two things we can say about James and John at this point is that:

- 1) They were motivated to some degree by a certain ambitious spirit.
- 2) They manifested a lack of understanding concerning the ways of the Lord.

It is not always easy to know the chronological arrangement of events in the four Gospels, but we know that there were several times when the Lord repeated Himself for the sake of emphasizing various truths which He wanted His disciples to learn. I cite one which is recorded for us in Luke's Gospel alone. It is found in Luke 14:8-11:

8 When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him;

9 And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room.

10 But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.

11 For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

But James and John should also have known what Hezekiah's men copied from Solomon's Proverbs. We find this recorded in Prov. 25:6, 7:

6 Put not forth thyself in the presence of the king, and

stand not in the place of great men:

7 For better it is that it be said unto thee, Come up hither;
than that thou shouldest be put lower in the presence of the
prince whom thine eyes have seen.

So it is clear that James and John were overlooking this lesson which taught both humility and an important glimpse into the ways of the Lord. While we want to be all that we can be for the Lord, yet we need to be careful about that fine line which often exists between our desires and our pride.

Next we need to look at:

II. THE LORD'S REBUKE OF JAMES AND JOHN (Matt. 20: 22, 23).

Instead of granting their request, He asked them about something that was completely different, something which was most assuredly ahead of them, but it was at the opposite end of the scale. They were interested in reigning; He asked them about suffering.

The Lord was not asking them to go to the cross with Him, but He was laying before them the grim reality that they were in different ways going to enter into His sufferings. Excluding Judas, James was the first of the apostles to give his life as a martyr. Suffering was to be the lot of all of the apostles, but that was not in James and John's minds at this time.

And then the Lord gave them a lesson in the sovereignty of God when He said concerning the place at His right hand and His left hand in the kingdom: "It shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father" (Matt. 20:23b). God does not make up His mind about things as time moves on. Our very steps are ordered by Him. He knows the way we take because He has ordained our way.

As I studied this event in the life of our Lord, my mind was directed (and I am sure that the Holy Spirit did it) to James 4:3. Perhaps you have thought of this, too. Let me read it for you:

Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may
consume it upon your lusts.

Remember that while "lusts" is often used in Scripture about sinful lusts, yet lusts do not have to be evil. A lust is a desire of some kind, whether it be good or evil. But we also have good lusts which may not be the right thing for us. They may not be the will of God for us. So before we come

to the Lord with our requests we need to be as sure as we can that we are not asking something to gratify our own desires rather than to seek the will of God for the glory of God. Our Lord promised over and over that we should expect definite answers to our prayers, but He does not give us just anything that we might ask Him for.

James and John were intruding into an area which was the domain of God the Father Himself. In cases like this we need to walk humbly with the Lord, and trust Him to place us where He wants us to be, and when He wants us to have a particular place.

There were far greater issues facing James and John at this moment than where they would sit in the Lord's kingdom. Our Lord was facing death, and, like the other apostles, they seemed to understand practically nothing about what was ahead for the Lord -- **and for them!**

Notice now:

III. THE EFFECT OF WHAT JAMES AND JOHN HAD DONE UPON THE OTHER APOSTLES (Matt. 20:24).

They were indignant. They were very unhappy with James and John. If I am not mistaken, this seems to have been the first trouble that really amounted to something among the twelve. We can see that they felt that this was nothing but pride on the part of these two brothers.

Solomon said this in one of his proverbs:

Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom (Prov 13:10).

Whether or not James and John knew that they were acting in pride, we cannot say. But we can say that this was the interpretation that the other ten put on it. If the Lord had granted their request, the next problem that they would have faced would have been who was going to have the real place of honor on the Lord's right hand!

But now what did the Lord do when He was faced with trouble among the apostles? The answer is clear: He turned again to teaching.

IV. THE LORD'S INSTRUCTION FOR ALL OF THE TWELVE (Matt. 20:25-28).

Probably the reason that the Lord taught all of the apostles was because He knew that the desire which made James and John to ask what they did,

was in all of them. Perhaps the reason for their indignation was that each of them felt that he was more worthy of such an honor than James and John were.

— This is one of the greatest lessons on humility and on the ways of the Lord that ever came from the lips of our Savior. Let us make sure that we do not miss it as far as our own lives are concerned. All of us have born in us a natural feeling of our own superiority and our own importance. It can disguise itself in many ways, often by the way we are offended by other people.

What was James and John's problem?

They were acting like people in the world act. The important people in the eyes of the world are the people at the top. If you are going to get anywhere in this world, you have to make sure that you get to them. They are the great ones. Unfortunately the church operates this way in many instances. Pastors will do everything that they can to "climb the ladder."

— But I want you to notice in particular our Lord's words at the beginning of verse 26: **"But it shall not be so among you."** This is a statement that we need to remember constantly. Just because people do things in a certain way in the world is no proof that we are to do things the same way in our lives, or in the church. In fact, if the world does things a certain way, that is probably a good reason for us not to imitate them. We are to get our directions from the Lord, and for us today that means living in obedience to the Word of God. We have all that we will ever need in the Scriptures to keep us on the right track, doing that which is going to be pleasing to the Lord. Our Lord was simply saying here that His ways and man's ways are not the same.

What is his way as far as greatness is concerned? We have our answer in verses 26, 27. (Read.)

Let me call your attention to two titles:

1) "Minister" (v. 26). This is the Greek word from which we get our word deacon. It speaks of one who serves --one who serves tables, one whose business it is to see that the needs of others are met.

The other word is:

— 2) "Servant" (v. 27). This means a bondservant. He is actually one who has no rights of his own. This is the way we are supposed to live. The people of the world are always demanding their rights. "But it

shall not be so among you.” This does not mean that we are to let people run over us and take advantage of us. But it means that we are to seek the lowest places instead of the highest. With the Lord, the way up with Him, is down!

How different this was from the idea that James and John had, and, evidently, from the idea that was in the minds of the other apostles. It is contrary to our idea of greatness, too.

In teaching it always helps to have an illustration. What was our Lord’s illustration? He was the illustration, and He stood before them as the illustration. (Read verse 28.)

The Lord had people who ministered to Him. Some of them were women. It may have been that the mother of James and John was one of them. But He did not come to have people serve Him even though He was the Lord of glory. He came to minister to others, and to minister to the point of dying for sinners so that those sinners could have a place before God which was equal to His.

We have this wonderful truth in Phil. 2:5-8. This was the Lord’s part in His relationship with God. What God did is told us in Phil. 2:9-11.

Concl: This morning we were considering “the hope of his calling,” God’s purpose in our salvation. It is that we be made like our Lord Jesus Christ. We think of this in terms of our character, in terms of personal holiness -- and we should. But let us never forget that this includes also our attitude toward others. If we are to be like our Lord, then we need to be ministers and servants, delighting if ours is the lowest place because that is the place our blessed Savior took when He came into this world.

What we need to desire is the place that the Lord has for us. That is His way. That is the place of greatest blessing for us, and that is the place where we will be used to glorify God. May our desire be to glorify God, and not to make a great name for ourselves.