

## WHO CAN DRINK FROM THIS CUP?

**TEXT:** Mark 10:35-45

They just don't get it. Period. The disciples just did not understand. Again. As we read through the Gospel of Mark we see time and again the predictable pattern. Jesus predicts his death and so commends humble and sacrificial living, and the disciples respond with an argument over rank, power and position. Even as we are getting a bit weary of this by now, Jesus tells the disciples what is on the docket for him and what do we get from James and John? Angling for cabinet posts in the new Jesus Administration. You can almost see the big cartoon bubble over Jesus' head containing just one word: "SIGH".

"Can you drink from the cup I am going to drink?" Of all the questions Jesus ever asked, this one deserved a careful, sober answer. It's not a question to answer too quickly. Unless, that is, you happen to think the way James and John thought. They answered Jesus' question with a very quick, "You bet we can!" That's the kind of answer one gives when envisioning the "cup" in question to be a bejeweled golden goblet filled with good wine at the feast of Jesus' Inauguration as the replacement for Caesar.

Yes, they would drink from Jesus' cup. But they didn't have a clue as to what that would involve. Only Jesus knew, and I am sure that he could feel nothing but sorrow for what his dear friends one day would have to endure for his sake.

For what James and John were seeking was power. To be seated on the right and left hand in Christ's Kingdom meant they would occupy places of priority, places of privilege, places of power. But then came the hard words: "Whosoever shall be great among you shall be your servant, and whosoever of you will be the greatest, shall be servant of all". What in the heck is that all about?

Despite Jesus' repeated predictions of his own death, the disciples continued to miss the boat in order to focus on their own preconceived notions of Jesus' ushering in an earthly kingdom in which there would be cabinet posts for which the disciples would

have to compete. Jesus tried to help them understand. “You just don’t get it, do you,” he says as he huddles them together. “Do you think that my ministry is about nothing more than merely re-treading the business-as-usual power plays of the rest of the world? Have I ever seemed interested in Roman-like power and privilege? I am all about servanthood. I came to serve not be served, so if it’s greatness you’re looking for in the kingdom that is coming, you’d all best start grasping for the bottom rung of the ladder!”

Somehow, this whole thing is reminiscent of our own political shenanigans. We see this every day, and especially in the final days of our mid-term election posturing. Everyone is displaying the same bad character traits, just in different ways. Jesus’ response is one of variously humor, surprise, compassion, and also of incredulity that the disciples have not understood what he is doing. “You don’t know what you are asking”, he tells them.

Leadership in the ‘Kingdom of Jesus’ comes through service. Service, not control, is the substance of leadership in God’s kingdom. Suffering, not “success” is often its reward.

Jesus is calling us to be different from the world around us. If things are the same among the Christian community as they are in the world, something is wrong. That difference should start with a different kind of leadership, leadership that comes from places of service and humility. Jesus points out that the disciples are acting just like the secular rulers they despise. In their behavior, we see what Jesus had to work with in fashioning leaders for the early church. And yet, in an odd way, that’s good news for us. If the self-promoting James and John can go on and give their lives, both literally and figuratively, in serving Jesus, surely we have no excuse ourselves for not becoming the type of servant leaders that the church and our world desperately need.

We often associate leadership with fame, wealth, status, and privilege. This is as true for us today as it was for Jesus in his context. No one expected the messiah to be born in a stable, the illegitimate son of a carpenter. Jesus, in his life and death, turned the tables and revealed the great paradox of the religious life: greatness grows in us through service to others; privilege is granted to those who privilege others

before themselves; we must be willing to lose our fame, wealth, status, privilege, and even our very lives if we wish to keep them. I think Jesus valued his Jewish identity and culture, his inherent human dignity, and his commitment to serve and empower the oppressed more than he valued his life, so he ransomed his life in order to preserve these values in himself, and in the lives and memories of his followers.

Are there any examples of such leadership in the history of our country? Unfortunately, we have to go back in history to find examples.

During the American Revolution a man in civilian clothes rode past a group of soldiers repairing a small defensive barrier. Their leader was shouting instructions, but making no attempt to help them. Asked why by the rider, he retorted with great dignity, “Sir, *I am a corporal!*” The stranger apologized, dismounted and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. The job done, he turned to the corporal and said, “Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief, and ask him to contact me and I will come and help you again”. With that General George Washington, the future President of the United States, got back on his horse and rode off. The kind of leadership George Washington exhibited was a lot closer to the kind of leadership Jesus is talking about than the kind of leadership the corporal was exhibiting. It is the kind of leadership we need today.

Leadership is service, not honor. Position is gained through suffering and God’s initiative, not self-promotion or favoritism.

We watch the debates as our political process takes its course. We hear more said about what the candidates would do for us if we will only elect them to the positions of power that they seek. Just like the brothers James and John they want to assume positions of leadership that would give them great prestige, satisfy their egos, and give them power over others. They are not very different from many of us who desire nothing more than to follow Jesus, if only he will give us what we want and not challenge us to change the way we live.

In 2009, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a wonderful sermon about what he called the “drum major instinct”. He defined this as the desire for recognition, importance and attention. He warned that the drum major instinct can become destructive if it is not harnessed. It can cause one’s personality to become distorted, ending up with ego problems. He said: “...the great tragedy of the distorted personality is the fact that when one fails to harness this instinct, he ends up trying to push others down in order to push himself up. And whenever you do that you engage in some of the most vicious activities. You will spread evil, vicious, lying gossip on people, because you are trying to pull them down in order to push yourself up. And the great issue of life is to harness the drum major instinct.” We need to hear these words today.

“Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” Jesus asked James and John. “We can,” they replied confidently, and in some ways we reply with equal confidence today. Every time we approach the Lord’s Table that exact same cup of suffering and humility stands right before our very eyes. Each time we celebrate the feast, we grasp a cube of bread and intinct it in a cup. As we do so, we perform a sign that we believe in Jesus. We believe in his program. We believe in his gospel. We believe in his self-proclaimed path to true spiritual greatness.

How often does our drinking of Jesus’ cup in this way transform our lives? Or are we about as likely as James and John to turn right around and come Monday morning start arguing for power in the world – in the church – in our business – in our families? We affirm Jesus’ cup. But do we join Jesus in trying to seize the bottom rung of the ladder? Does that characterize our living? How would our day-to-day lives be changed if it did?

When we, like James and John, ask Jesus for special privileges, we hear the reply: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, are you able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” “We are able,” they said. Are we able? Amen.