

## **A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 10:35-45**

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James and John's request to Jesus to sit at his right hand and his left is a political move. This is a request for positions of power in what they assume will be Jesus' government. The one who sat at the right hand and at the left hand of the kings of the ancient near East were their chief advisers. It was equivalent to being Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. The assumption underlying their request is that Jesus will establish a new government, that he will be king, and that he will appoint them as chief advisers. They assume that as disciples they are in line to be the main leaders in Jesus' administration. Their tone is one of political begging, of requesting an inside track and of speaking intimately to Jesus as a way of getting positions of power.

Jesus' response is one of variously humor, surprise, compassion, and also of incredulity that they have not understood what he is doing: "You don't know what you're asking." His explanation is to ask them a question about whether they are ready to drink the cup that he drinks and to be baptized with his baptism. Clearly in the structure of the story, he is referring to his passion. That is confirmed in Gethsemane when Jesus prays, "Take this cup from me." It is the cup of suffering that Jesus is describing to James and John, and the baptism is the baptism of suffering. Their response, still thinking that what he means is whether they willing to give up everything for his government, is like the Pledge of Allegiance. In effect, they say, "You know we are able to do what ever it is needed to follow you and we'll follow you into battle; no matter what happens we are with you."

Jesus' response is still in the context of his recognition of what is ahead. It is a prophecy of their passion: "Yes you will drink the cup that I drink and you will be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized." Jesus recognizes and predicts their suffering. But their positions in God's kingdom are not for Jesus to decide. That's not for anyone to decide; rather, God has decided it. The anger of the ten other disciples at James and John is anger over their blatant effort to promote themselves ahead of the other disciples. In telling the story, do not hesitate to express that anger.

In response to their anger, Jesus tries to maintain good relationships within the community of the disciples. He acts as a mediator and as an interpreter. In telling the story, gather the audience as disciples and address them in the spirit of Jesus as their leader. Jesus points to the overall political context in which they live: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise tyranny over them." This is the experience of Jews who are subject to the rule of the Roman emperor and the Roman Empire. It is also a description of the patterns of power present in the nations of the ancient near East that all of them knew about.

Furthermore, Jesus' counsel makes a distinction between the Gentiles as the others, and "you" (namely, Jews). This is one of many indications in the Gospel of Mark that the

audience is predominately Jewish. That doesn't mean that Mark excludes Gentiles. Mark is clearly addressing Gentiles in his explanation of the cleanliness laws in Mark 7. Mark includes them, but they are not his primary audience for the Gospel, as is indicated in this story. What Jesus advocates is that the disciples' pattern of life is not to be like that of the Gentiles. The way in which they order and govern their lives will be different than the Gentile pattern of domination. The sign of that is the way in which Jesus himself has conducted his ministry as one who serves, rather than one who is served by others.

Jesus says, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and has given his life as a ransom for many." One of the most important dimensions of this saying has been its misinterpretation in the history of theology. The primary way in which it has been understood is as a ransom paid to God for the forgiveness of sins. That is explicitly stated by Anselm. However, in Mark, Jesus' life is not a ransom paid to God. It is not a ransom for the forgiveness of sins in which God is somehow paid off by Jesus' death.

The framework of Mark's Gospel is that Jesus has come to set people free from the power of evil, from Satan, from the structures of evil in the world. Specifically, Jesus has come to set people free from spiritual bondage to the Romans' rule. When he gives his life, he gives his life by allowing himself to be crucified by the powers of this age, specifically the Romans, as a way of setting free those who are bound by the domination of the Roman Empire. There is no place in the Gospel of Mark in which there is the implication that the ransom paid by Jesus' suffering and death is a ransom that is paid to God. In the ancient world ransoms were paid to the captors. People who were captured by an enemy army were ransomed by paying the opponent. So also with pirates, who captured people in the ancient world. Such captives would be set free by a ransom that was paid to the pirates. Ransoms were paid to the captors. That is the understanding of a ransom paid. Jesus gave his life as a ransom that was paid to the captors, who were people, not God.

It is important to recognize that this story does not support the theological idea of a ransom for the forgiveness of sins being paid to God. Mark is telling the story of Jesus who established a new government, not by attacking enemies, not by establishing an army and setting up a new government in which there was a new structure of power established by defeating the armies of his enemies. Rather, Jesus was involved in nonviolent resistance to the structures of this age and in recognizing that the possibility of peace, joy, and the gifts of the kingdom of God were present now for those who would choose to follow him. Suffering for others and serving others is the way of ransoming others from captivity.