

Mark 10:35-45 ³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They replied, "We are able." Then 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; ⁴⁰ 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." ⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
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Today I want to start imagine that Americans have finally gotten tired of all those reality talent competitions like “Dancing with the Stars” and “America’s Got Talent” and “American Idol.” So the producers of these kinds of television programs are looking for a new angle, and they want to try out a Christian American Idol, if you will. They’ve come to our church seeking advice on how this show should be developed.

First, the producers want to know what criteria they should use to judge the competition. Any suggestions?

The person who gives the most money to the church?
The nicest person?
The Christian with the best Jesus hair?
The Christian who bakes the best cookies?
The Christian who puts in the most hours at the rummage sale?
How about the Christian with the best singing voice?

Who should be the greatest Christian? Who should be number one, first in line at the pearly gates?

The producers of Christian American Idol also want to know who should judge this competition. Most of these kinds of shows seem to favor the three-judge panel. Three judges? Anyone? How about a little theological concept called the Trinity? The church is *made* for this!

Okay, so now that we’ve cleared up our judging criteria and our panel of judges, now is anybody ready to take on the challenge for the title of best Christian in the church? Any takers? No?

All right. So the idea of a “Christian Idol” is somewhat theologically suspect. But, I’m going to challenge you all to join the competition anyway.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were not afraid to compete. They saw an opportunity opening up for some primo positions in Jesus’ kingdom, and they wanted to snag that chance before it passed them by.

You see, just prior to the section of the gospel we read today, Jesus had explained to his disciples that he’s going to be “handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise

again.” You can just see the disciples going, “super. sounds like fun. way to go, guys. looks like we really picked a winner here.”

And that is when James and John decide to step up and demand places of honor. Interesting...

What’s even more interesting is that this is not just a situation involving James and John and their understanding of Jesus’ kingdom and what honor and glory mean. This episode illuminates what had become a pattern of behavior among the disciples.

The first time Jesus let the disciples in on the big secret that the master plan of their project involved him suffering and dying, Peter, who had become the undisputed head honcho of the twelve, pulled Jesus aside to try to gently let him know that this might not be the greatest idea the creator of the universe has ever cooked up. One might think that Jesus’ response of “get behind me, Satan” would deter future challenges to Jesus’ leadership, but no.

The second time Jesus tried to convince his disciples that, like it or not, he really was going to be given over to the authorities to be beaten and killed, his disciples responded by arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. Those of you who were here for John’s “Don’t Be a Chimp” sermon might remember that episode. This time, the disciples tried to go behind Jesus’ back to jostle for position. But Jesus, being the perceptive fellow that he was, used this opportunity to try to once again teach his disciples about leadership and power, glory and honor in the kingdom of God.

So then the third time Jesus foretold his suffering, death, and resurrection, we can only expect that what will follow is another power grab.

And really, it makes perfect sense. Jesus basically told his followers, his inside leadership group, that he’s going to be out of the picture soon, at least for a while. Considering how the disciples fled and hid out during and after Jesus’ death, we can assume they either didn’t understand or didn’t believe the part about being raised from the dead in three days. So, in the disciples’ viewpoint, Jesus’ leadership of this band of rebels is more or less coming to and end. It’s only natural in such circumstances that the topic of succession should arise.

Jesus had apparently become accustomed to his disciples’ pattern of behavior. When James and John asked for a blank check – “we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you,” Jesus didn’t say yes, but he didn’t say no. He humored their request, asking what it was they’d like him to do.

Enter the Christian Idol contest. James and John, sons of Zebedee, step right up and throw their hats in the ring. They start by simply stating with the confidence of any star-to-be that they should just be given the places of honor in Jesus’ kingdom (because everyone knows they’re going to win anyway). But Jesus doesn’t think they quite understand what this competition is all about. He informs them that it involves suffering

and death, along the lines of what he has already described concerning his own fate. Jesus asks the competitors if they're really up to the challenge. And, again with great confidence, James and John claim they can do it. Then Jesus tells them, "you know, you're right, you can compete, and you will. But whether or not you win isn't up to me. In fact, the competition has already been decided. Sorry guys."

So Jesus dashed the hopes of James and John for winning the first-ever Christian Idol competition, but he didn't leave them without a bit of helpful advice. He pulled all the contestants together, all of his disciples, and he told them that the criteria they'll be judged by is not what they think. He re-defines the competition. This competition isn't about leadership, honor, or power. It's not even about winning, coming in first place. The winner of the competition is the one who serves.

Jesus says, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." The word servant here comes from the Greek word diakonos, which is where we get our word Deacon. So, if you are a deacon, or have ever been a deacon, you might think of throwing your hat in the ring for our little competition here.

But then Jesus takes it a step further, saying, "whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." This word "slave" is the Greek word "doulos," which usually refers to someone in bondage. As one commentary puts it, "diakonos views a servant in relationship to his work; doulos views him in relationship to his master."¹

So Jesus tells the would-be contestants that they must not only do the work of servants, they must also submit themselves in a servile relationship to each other.

Now that's not easy, friends.

I worked as a waiter for a couple of years in New York City restaurants. I served all sorts of people from tourists to trapeze artists, the rich and famous, and the homeless who came by for leftovers. And serving suited me. I had no problem with the work. But I didn't have to see myself in relationship to most of the people I served. I performed a service, but I wasn't their servant.

Then once, I was trying to save up some extra money to get new headshots, and I was offered a job cleaning an apartment. Again, I didn't mind the work. There was something rewarding about battling dust and grime. But the problem came when the apartment-owner came home before I was finished and gone. When I would interact with this person, week after week, I suddenly found myself in a relationship of servitude. And I couldn't take it. It was too demeaning. So I finally quit.

There is something very different between the act of serving and the relationship of serving. Actions don't necessarily change us or define us. Relationships do. Most of us don't mind serving. But most of us don't want to be someone's servant.

¹ Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.

But that's exactly what Jesus advises his followers to be. *Do* service, and *be* servants. *That's* how you become great. *That's* how you come in first.

And Jesus gives them proof to back up his advice. He uses himself as an example. Jesus, the leader, the Lord, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of Man, "came not to be served but to serve." Now here, Jesus uses that diakonos word. He does acts of service. So where's his servant relationship, his doulos? Jesus goes beyond doulos, beyond a servile relationship. Jesus tells them it is his intention to "give his life as a ransom for many." Now, many here means the multitude, all the people, not a distinction between many and everybody else. This is an expansive, inclusive statement. Jesus is not in a servant relationship, Jesus gave us his life to free us all from servitude. A ransom, in the first century, was most often spoken of in reference to the price paid to free someone from being...a doulos.

Now you can just see the disciples scratching their heads as they think, "Okay, he wants us to be servants so that he can free us from being servants?"

Right. Exactly.

You see, the thing that is so demeaning about that servant relationship is that it requires us to set aside our wills, our desires, our very selves, in service to the will and desire of another person. And if we can't do that for every one of God's children, we can't do it for God either. If we want to serve God, we have to serve God's people. And it requires more than action. It requires relationship. It requires us to re-define who we are in relationship to other people. We are no longer business people or parents, retirees or students. We are doulos. We are servants. And in our service, we will find our ransom in Jesus Christ.

In case you haven't figured this out already, there is a winner in our competition this morning. The criteria by which we are judged is our servant hood. And Jesus Christ wins first place, sitting at the right hand of God in God's kingdom. But Jesus couldn't really win unless he made us all winners through him. That's the ultimate servant relationship. Jesus wins first prize because he makes us all winners. We all get to come in first because of him.