*Do This for Me*

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Ok, so what is going on in this week’s text? We have two brothers who have attached themselves to a charismatic leader. This leader is preaching about the coming of a new kingdom, the Kingdom of God. They seem to be convinced that he is the real thing. So what do they do? They ask him to allow them to have the places of honor and to share in his power when he is glorified. For glorified, read, when he is recognized as the leader of the new kingdom.

When we read this we think, “Wait guys, you don’t know what you’re getting into.” Which is exactly what Jesus tells them, “You don’t know what you are asking.” We know because we know the whole story and we know what will happen to Jesus. But James and John don’t know, it’s still in the future for them. Not only that, they really don’t understand who Jesus is.

This is a main theme in Mark’s Gospel. People, even Jesus’ disciples, don’t seem to understand who Jesus is. Oh, they know he is charismatic and that he has extraordinary powers. They even know he is the Messiah (Mark 8:29). But herein lies the problem. Jesus is not the kind of Messiah they are expecting.

From the time of the Babylonian exile down to Jesus’ time the Jews have looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. But the Messiah they were expecting was a human leader, with extraordinary powers from God. He was going to drive the foreign invaders from Palestine, restore the kingdom of David, and secure it from outside invaders forever. All of this he would accomplish through divine powers given to him.

So James and John saw Jesus as this promised Davidic King who would rule over a restored Israel. No wonder they wanted to sit at his right hand and his left in his glory. They would be sitting next to Jesus as he sat on his throne. They would be in positions of great honor, not to mention great power.

Jesus quickly disabuses them of their error. As he has told them before, though obviously they did not understand, his fate is not to be the ruler of a new Israel but to be rejected, vilified, and crucified. Then immediately Jesus goes on to tell them that their fate will be like his. As followers of Jesus they will be rejected, vilified and killed.

The story goes on to say that the other 10 disciples were angry with James and John. Almost certainly we are meant to understand that the 10 were not angry with them for their misunderstanding of Jesus, but they were angry because James and John tried to put themselves in line ahead of the others who also were expecting a share of Jesus’ honor and glory.

So what is the meaning we are to take away from this story? The clue lies in the finish of the story. Jesus tells the 12, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:43-44) Then Jesus concludes with a statement about himself, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45). So at least one meaning we are to take away from this story is the problem of overweening pride and self-interest.

Many of you know that I worked in the pharmaceutical industry for nearly 37 years. I began my career with a master’s degree. I started at Upjohn as a statistical assistant. That meant my job was working with a senior person, helping them to complete their work. But that was ok. I was doing what I loved, science. I had lived for three years on a graduate student’s stipend and the amount I was now being paid seemed luxurious. My life style did not change quickly and at one point I got a letter from payroll asking me to please cash my last three paychecks.

It did not take long for my life style to begin changing. No longer was I forgetting to cash my pay checks. I worked even harder, as much to get good performance reviews and increased pay as for the love of science. By my third year, it was clear to me that my current status would only go so far in getting me better pay and a better job. I felt I was ready for bigger assignments and was quite frankly envious of others making better money than I did. I knew I needed to go back to school and get a PhD. That was the golden ticket to a better career.

After I received my PhD, I moved around a little but eventually returned to the Upjohn Company. I came back to a higher level position. I had projects of my own and substantially better salary. That was good, because I had started a family and my financial needs had started to grow. I still loved science and had also realized that the work I was doing was helping to make life better for people. That was a good feeling.

As time went on, recognition of my work, promotions, and pay increases became a dominant force in my life. I did not recognize until much later that honor, pride, and self-interest were becoming the dominant force in my life. Love of science and helping people was becoming a justification for what I was doing, not the reason.

As time went on, aided by an older mentor, there were promotions and pay increases. But somehow they were not enough. I became envious of the power and pay of those who were in management. I remember going to my mentor one day and telling him I wanted to move into management. He told me, “You don’t know what you’re asking for.” Remember Jesus admonition to James and John?

I didn’t get into management right away and continued advancing in the scientific career path. But eventually, if you work for a company long enough, you become more valuable to the company for what you know about how the company works and not for what you know in your area of expertise. So I slipped into management. I did less and less real science, spent more time serving on committees and project teams, managing other people, managing budgets, and making decisions on how to redecorate an office suite. My old mentor was right, I didn’t know what I was asking for.

Now the point of this perhaps overly long story is not how I came to hate my job, because I didn’t. I always felt I was making an important contribution to my company, to science, and to the health of people. The point is, I had become attached to honor, pride, and self-interest as my main motivators.

After my children had grown and I had retired, I had time to reflect on my life. I still feel that I contributed to the well-being of many people and the advancement of science. But I wonder how my life would have been different had pride and self-interest not became such a major part of my life.

Now you have heard my story. What about yours? Don’t worry, I’m not asking you to stand up and testify. I am asking you to begin thinking about your own life. Have you had times in your life when honor, pride, or self-interest have been your main motivator? I am not trying to judge you, nor asking you to judge yourself. I’m not perfect, in fact none of us are in this life.

I’m not even saying that honor, pride and self-interest are of themselves bad. Honor in its good sense is to have a keen sense of ethical conduct. Pride can mean having proper self-respect. Self-interest can arise from having self-respect, being concerned with your own well-being. Where honor, pride, and self-interest go wrong is when they lead us to expect what we don’t deserve. When they lead us to do things for our own benefit at the cost of others.

How shall we know when we have crossed the line between the good and the bad? The answer for Christians is simple and clear. Jesus has told us, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34) And again, Jesus says, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:31)

In fact, you do not need me to tell you this, as Paul says in his letter to the Thessalonians, “Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;”. (1Thessalonians 4:9) To know if you have stepped over the line, just examine your life, what it is you do? If you are harming another because of your honor, pride, or self-interest, even at distance removed, you have stepped over the line. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)