

“Sinful Ambition”
Mark 10:35-45
(Preached at Trinity, June 11, 2013)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. This story is found primarily in Mark and with variations in the other Gospels.
 - A. The account in Matthew's Gospel has the variation of the mother of James and John asking Jesus to elevate her sons to the place of honor. It is not a contradiction. The request of the mother was clearly the request of the sons.
Matthew 20:21 NAS - "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left."
 - B. In Luke's Gospel we find the same desire for greatness but no particular request being made by individual disciples.
Luke 22:24 NAU - "And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest."
2. This is a very interesting passage in light of the context. Jesus had spent much time teaching the importance of selfless humility.
 - A. In Chapter 8:
Mark 8:34-35 NAU - "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ³⁵ "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it."
Salvation is about giving up our life to Christ.
 - B. In **Chapter 9** He taught them the importance of being willing to serve others; of being willing to place others before ourselves.
Mark 9:33-35 NAU - "They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He *began* to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which *of them* was the greatest. ³⁵ Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.""
 - C. Just a brief period earlier Jesus had used children as an example of the smallness of those entering the Kingdom. They must become humble and dependent.
Jesus said:
Mark 10:15 NAU - "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it *at all*."
 - D. The most amazing thing about this is the timing. Jesus had just told them of His approaching death and their only focus was upon their own exaltation.
Luke tells us the heart of their problem:
Luke 18:34 NAU - "But the disciples understood none of these things, and *the meaning of* this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said."
3. It would appear that the disciples hadn't heard *any* of our Lord's teaching. Last time I expressed the wonderful grace of God in teaching the disciples. Jesus taught them personally and intimately.

- Mark 10:32 NAU** - "And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him"
4. Having God's Word isn't the same thing as following it. God's Word has to convict us and stir our hearts to obedience. Hearing the Word of God preached is of little value if you do not heed it.
James spoke about this:
James 1:22-25 NAU - "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."
 5. After the rich teaching of our Lord on the importance of selfless humility James and John make the amazing declaration, we want You to give *US* the chief place.
Mark 10:37 NAU - "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on *Your* left, in Your glory."
 6. And then the other ten reveal their own heart in their anger over the request.
Mark 10:41 NAU - "Hearing *this*, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John."
 - a. On one hand they were angry at the selfish request of their brothers. At the same time they were displeased that James and John might receive a higher place than they will.
 - b. We are often prone to accuse others for the very things we have in our own hearts.
Romans 2:1 NAU - "Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things."
 7. It would not be until later after the coming of the indwelling Spirit that they would fully comprehend our Lord's teaching.
 - A. Peter would later write:
1 Peter 5:5-6 NAS - "all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,"
 - B. Paul declared the heart of the apostolic teaching:
Philippians 2:3-4 NAU - "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."
 8. On one hand it was a request of faith. They had absolute confidence that Jesus was the Messiah and that He would sit upon His throne.
On the other hand, it was a request of sinful ambition, seeking advancement for themselves above all else. It was a selfish request without regard for their brethren.
 9. And we cannot dismiss that it was their mother who was behind the request.
Matthew 20:21 NAS - "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left."
We must guard our hearts against seeing our children as more important than anything or anyone else—it is child worship or what I call paedolatry

10. Jesus revealed the foolishness of their request. As our prayers sometimes reveal, we often do not know the full ramifications of what we are praying for.
Mark 10:38 NAU - "You do not know what you are asking."
 Sometimes God allows us to suffer the consequence of our sinful ambitions.
 Sometimes He mercifully protects us from the foolishness of our ambitions.
- A. We pray for a promotion not realizing the misery that our new position will bring us and the detriment it will bring to our family. God in His mercy denies our request.
 - B. We pray that our child be accepted to a particular university not knowing it might be to the ruin of our child spiritually. God in His mercy denies our request.
 - C. A young person prays that such and such a person would become their mate. God knows the lifetime consequences of such a request. God in His mercy denies the request.
 - D. A father prays that his son would excel in his sport not knowing that it might lead the child away from Christ and harden him to the Gospel. God blesses the son with an injury ending his opportunities in sports.
11. Jesus tells James and John, "You do not know what you are asking"
 "You do not know the full ramifications of what you are asking."
 A request to follow Jesus to His throne is a request to follow the path of His death.
Mark 10:38 NAU - "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"
- A. "Drink the cup" was an idiom that meant "enter into the experience."
 Were they prepared to drink the cup of Jesus' suffering or be immersed in His agony?
 - B. They wanted to be exalted above the other disciples. Would they be willing to die for them?
 - C. Even with these probing questions the disciples still had their hearts fixed on their goal of grandeur.
Mark 10:39 NAU - "They said to Him, "We are able."
12. Jesus responded by telling them they would indeed suffer the pains of the martyr's death. James would be beheaded—**Verse 39**
 John was exiled on the Island of Patmos but was probably eventually martyred.
13. Jesus compared their heart with the people of this world.
Mark 10:42 NAU - "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them."
- A. Jesus is telling them (and us) that this whole mentality they were manifesting is the way of the Gentiles. They spend all of their time and energies trying to get to the top with the motivation of personal gain, self-exaltation
 - B. And then when they make it to the place of authority they pretend to have the benefit of those under them in mind when in reality they are still only seeking to gain for themselves.
- Luke records that Jesus even used the word "benefactors."
Luke 22:25 NAS - "And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.'" (a doer of good)
14. The way of our Lord's Kingdom is quite different.

Mark 10:43-44 NAU - "But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all."

A. Our Lord's Kingdom is not the way of self-advancement but of advancing the Kingdom and righteousness.

Matthew 6:33 NAU - "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness"

B. Our Lord's Kingdom is a kingdom of humility, of service

Some closing thoughts:

1. We must always guard our hearts from self-centeredness. James and John were guilty of selfish ambition—seeking to exalt themselves above all others. Are you interested in the lives of others? When gathered with others how much of your conversation is focused on yourself?

Phil. 2:3-4 - "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."

2. Are you willing to humble yourself before God and wait upon Him?

a. The disciples failed to see the great blessing of humbling themselves and waiting upon God. In their lust for advancement they were given over to scheming ambition.

God's purposes for us are perfect. We must wait upon Him to advance us.

1 Peter 5:6 NAU - "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time"

b. God's timing is often completely different from our own.

- Moses was 80 years old before he was ready to lead God's people. He spent 40 years as a shepherd in the wilderness of Midian
- Joshua served faithfully as Moses' servant for 40 years before he was ready to lead God's people.

c. God is able to use you in His way according to His perfect timing. The so called "dead end" job suddenly takes on new meaning when viewed through God's eyes and the glory of His purpose.

d. God wonderfully prepared Joseph humbling him in many ways through great adversity in order to equip him to deliver Israel from the famine.

He would later say to his brothers:

Genesis 50:20 NAU - "As for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."

e. Our culture is characterized by a terrible restlessness. We change jobs often. Americans will change careers 7-10 times over their lifetimes. According to Lifeway the average time pastor remains in a church is 3.6 years. Americans move to a different house every 5-7 years.

3. Do you recognize your utter weakness and inability apart from God's grace?

Mark 10:38-39 NAU - "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" ³⁹ They said to Him, "We are able."

Moses:

Exodus 3:11 NAU - "But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"

Exodus 4:10 NAU - "Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Gideon:

Judges 6:15 NAU - "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house."

Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 1:6 NAU - "Alas, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, Because I am a youth."