

Both when I was studying to become a teacher and a pastor I was fortunate to be in programs with robust field education requirements. I observed my supervising teacher for two years before student teaching, and I spent a year with a mentor in a congregation and another year in hospital chaplaincy before my seminary internship. Personally, I found that time to be beneficial, as I got some good advice and experience, but those early placements also prevented candidates from going all the way through the theoretical learning and academic requirements of a degree, only to discover in the very last phase of their education that the practical, day-to-day responsibilities of those jobs were not what at all what they expected—or wanted to do. Our supervisors managed to thread the needle between sugar-coating the experience and scaring us away, so we would know what we were getting into but still be willing to do it. Jesus attempted that on-the-job training with the disciples, but it didn't exactly stick.

We are almost to the end of Mark's gospel, just a few verses from Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem ahead of the crucifixion. That means the disciples have spent almost as much time learning from Jesus as they're going to get—three years, based on the timeline in John's gospel. Jesus had begun to warn them about his upcoming death and resurrection; a couple weeks ago we read that when he told them this, they didn't understand him but were afraid to ask. Today, Mark tells us that they have no qualms about asking questions—when they're asking for favors for themselves. James and John are bold enough to ask Jesus to give them whatever they want, which turns out to be the places of highest honor—to his right and left; the reaction of the other ten disciples suggests that they were not so much offended by the request as mad that James and John thought to ask for it first.

Jesus flat out tells them that they don't know what they're asking, and we who know the rest of the story know that Jesus is right and James and John are clueless. They think they are equal to all the tasks that Jesus will endure, but we know how the events that are foreshadowed here turn out: James and John say they are able to drink the same cup as Jesus, but when Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemane praying for the cup to be removed from him—because Jesus doesn't want to suffer any more than any of the rest of us do—James and John fall asleep. They want the places to the right and left of Jesus in his glory, but Jesus is glorified in his selfless sacrifice on the cross, with criminals on cross to his right and left. James and John, as well as the rest of the disciples, have watched Jesus feed the hungry, heal the ill and injured, forgive sinners, preach liberation, and call the rich and powerful to account...yet they're still expecting him to start acting like any other worldly ruler.

Jesus corrects them: *it's people who don't know the living God who lord it over each other and act like tyrants. That is not the way things are supposed to work with you. If you want to be the very best disciple, you do that by serving everyone else, because that's what I came to do—to serve, not to be served.*

We criticize James and John and the other disciples for learning from Jesus first hand yet missing the point. However, we have their example *and* Jesus' correction, and Christians have still spent two millennia acting as though there was some sort of bait and switch—as if Jesus' humble, selfless service, acts of merciful healing, and even death on the cross were just a means by which he achieved his real glory—that is, as the ultimate version of our earthly rulers. Jesus said, *You are not to do things the way the world does them*, but the church has so often said, *We can do what the rest of the world does as long as we say we're doing it in Jesus' name*. No; that's how we ended up with a whole history of the Christian church abandoning Jesus' example of loving service to seek wealth and power, often by force, though that's the farthest thing from what Jesus did. Instead of the world being transformed by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we've tried to transform Jesus into just another of the world's kings—because that's who we'd rather follow.

What the disciples—then and ever since—misunderstood was that Jesus' feeding, healing, forgiving, serving work wasn't what he did until he one day came into his glory as king; that selfless and life-giving service was what gave glory to God, it's what made Jesus king—not king by human standards, but of the kingdom of God. It is a way of being in the world that is entirely different from the way the rest of the world works. *You know how people act when they don't know God*, Jesus says. *But that is not the way it is supposed to work with you*. James and John somehow had gotten the idea that being a follower of Jesus meant they were going to get to sit in the most prestigious places and watch Jesus rule like any other king on an earthly throne. In reality, Jesus had been ruling the kingdom of God by selflessly serving other people the whole time they knew him. If they truly wanted to be in the places closest to him, they would be right there beside him, with the sleeves of their robes rolled up, serving other people just like he did.

With our big, beautiful church buildings, with our shiny crosses and candle sticks, Christianity has, intentionally or not, given the impression that following Jesus means enjoying a life of blessing. But when we look closer, following Jesus isn't about what's in it for us: we are blessed, but our blessings come in the form of opportunities to serve others. Nobody is forcing us to be disciples of Christ, but if that's who we want to be, then that's going to look like putting others first, because that's what Christ did. May God bless us with hearts to love and serve like Jesus and hands to carry out that work.