

Sons of Entitlement: Mark 10:35-45

by [Stephen B. Chapman](#) in the [October 17, 2006](#) issue

James and John McZebedee matriculated at my seminary again this fall. The “Sons of Entitlement,” I call them. They are usually—but not always—young and white in addition to being male. They have typically grown up in the church, attended Christian colleges and majored in religion. They like to refer to their mental index of Theologians Worth Reading and readily scoff at those theologians they have not read (and so are not worth reading). They patronize second-career students, female students, minority students and those ministerial students who are without apparent academic ambitions. Their fathers are frequently pastors. It is possible, these Sons of Entitlement piously concede in candid moments, that God may be calling them to become professors or bishops. They are rather easy to dislike.

Plus, they push hard in the classroom. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” It is not exactly a request but more of a demand barely cloaked in a statement of fact. The Sons of Entitlement talk a lot—preventing others from speaking—and pose questions that are more like efforts at entrapment than genuine attempts to learn. (“Teacher, since you said X before, how can Y also be true? Are you sure you know what you are talking about? I read a book once that said something else.”) These students bristle at structure and deadlines (such things are for lesser students); regular attendance (they have more pressing obligations); and real, rather than inflated, grades (they received straight As in college, so why should they be getting Bs now?). Not too long ago, a student asked me during a final exam if he could write an essay on a topic of his own choosing rather than on one of the three possibilities provided by the test. When I explained that such latitude would be unfair to everyone else in the course, he replied softly, “No one else has to know.” On another occasion he expressed interest in becoming a bishop. I bet he makes it.

I tend toward righteous indignation when I encounter such greedy ambition. But Jesus is annoyingly patient in similar situations. The words that come to my mind are, “Who do you think you are?” The words that Jesus says are, “What is it you want me to do for you?” Surely he must realize that Zebedee’s boys need to straighten out their values and goals. After all, their primary concern is where they

will sit in glory, not whether they can actively pursue a ministry or earn rightful acclaim. Yet Jesus engages their request respectfully, if also firmly. “You do not know,” he tells them. He means, “You still do not fully realize what Christian glory entails, how very different from worldly glory is the glory waiting for me.” Jesus has in fact just told all the disciples what will happen to him (vv. 33–34), how he will be betrayed, condemned, mocked, spat upon, flogged and killed, but then rise again.

It is the rising-again part that has apparently captured the attention of James and John. To their way of thinking, this is an excellent moment to make a bid for leadership roles in the messianic kingdom. By contrast, Jesus’ response seeks to remind them that the way to messianic glory leads through the cross. The “cup” Jesus will drink is the cup of his destiny, his suffering, his abasement. Even he will ask God to take it from him before things are done (Mark 14:36). But James and John claim for themselves a capacity that Jesus himself can only barely manage: “We are able.”

At first glance, the old hymn seems to have gotten the significance of the words dreadfully wrong. “Are ye able, said the Master / To be crucified with Me? / Yea, the sturdy dreamers answered / To the death we follow Thee / Lord, we are able.” Does this lyric not turn the disciples into heroes, ironically underwriting their pretension to glory? Yet both Jesus and the hymn surprise me. Jesus credits James and John with sincerity and grants their request. Or, rather, he grants part of their request. He grants them a share in his suffering and shame. Seats in glory are not his to give.

But the question remains: why does he grant them anything at all? Jesus surely perceives the selfishness of their ambition and the ignorance behind their youthful boldness. They really do not know what they are getting themselves into. Yet he accepts their desire for glory insofar as he can. So there must be something here worth engaging, worth affirming, worth granting. My own tendency is to demonize James and John, but Jesus treats their ambition as worthy of redemption. I am reminded of how earlier in this chapter a rich man bragged that he had kept all the commandments. Then Jesus, “looking at him, loved him,” we are told (v. 21).

Maybe the greater sin in the seminary and the church is not misplaced ambition but complacency and lack of ambition altogether. Where ambition exists, it can be redirected and purified. But where it is entirely absent, mediocrity takes hold, the status quo hardens, and professors and committees debate endlessly about methodology and procedure. Yes, it is too easy to demonize James and John; their

act of stepping forward matters more to Jesus than their immediate reasons for doing so. Rather than begrudging the ambition of the Sons of Entitlement, then, might I engage them with respect and love, as Jesus did, while working to refocus their ambition on the cross? The second verse of the hymn adopts that very approach: "Are you able to relinquish / Purple dreams of power and fame / To go down into the garden / Or to die a death of shame?"

Now the refrain. James? John? Anyone? Are you able?