The Right Tools for Discipleship

St. James, the Elder T Mark 10:35-45

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James the elder was the brother of John, Jesus’ beloved disciple.

He was a part of the “inner three” disciples – Peter, James, and John.

Those three were together at Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain,

As well as at the raising of Jairus’ daughter.

Today, we remember James and learn from him –

Not necessarily as a positive example for Christians to follow,

But to learn what tempts pious Christians,

And how we understand service as a disciple rightly.

Today, James and John seem to have good intentions in the Gospel lesson,

but they don’t get it quite right.

They ask if they could serve alongside Jesus in His glory.

This is good!

They want to serve Jesus in His kingdom.

However,

they don't understand what serving at Jesus' left and right hand entails.

James and John have had trouble serving God in the past.

One time, Jesus was traveling on His way to Jerusalem

and as He was approaching a Samaritan village,

Jesus sent some disciples ahead of Him to see if there was a place for Him to stay.

However, after the disciples came back,

they reported that the Samaritans in the village didn’t want Jesus to stay there.

The sons of thunder,

which is a nickname that Jesus gave James and John,

show why they are deserving of their nickname

– they want to punish this poor Samaritan village.

They asked Jesus,

“Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

James and John thought that’s how you’re supposed to act in the kingdom with Jesus.

It's not surprising that this is how the sons of thunder act

because force is an attractive, effective tool for getting your way.

It’s really the main tool in our toolboxes.

For example, if a football coach wants his running back to stop fumbling the football,

he could pull him aside and kinda explain why fumbling the football may not be so good for the team,

or he could tell him “if you fumble my football again, it’s two laps around the field.”

Force seems like the easiest, best way to get things done.

This is why in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus describes the Kingdom of God,

it sounds strange to our ears.

Don’t hate your enemies but love them.

If anyone slaps you on the left cheek,

turn your face to let them slap the other side.

Don’t store up earthly treasures –

where force is a good tool to use to accumulate wealth over others –

but seek after heavenly treasures.

Jesus encourages us to ignore our inclination to pick up force out of the toolbox.

Though they, and perhaps we, struggle to know what tools to use as disciples,

shortcomings don’t separate us from the God’s love.

Nothing can separate us from God’s love –

No powers, nothing in creation, not death, not life.

Not even the angels in heaven!

We’re still in training.

Yet the humbled Christ eventually breaks through to these pompous disciples, and also to us in our moments of pride.

As Christians, we’re striving serve God in His glory,

just like James and John.

We want to serve in God’s kingdom.

And we know this is what Jesus wants of us, but we’re still learning what this means.

We continually learn what tools we should use as God’s people,

And what tools we should put down.

Like He does for James and John,

Jesus draws us along with Him to the cross.

And as we go with Him,

He continually points to His suffering on Golgotha as the place where His glory is achieved.

Through suffering, His evil foe, the enemy, is defeated.

Through suffering, He shows love to those who hate Him.

Through suffering, His heavenly treasures

– innocence, holiness, and eternal glory –

become ours here on earth.

The story of Jesus is one of suffering for the sake of others.

The stories of other kingdoms tell of them winning over their enemies by forcing them into submission.

But Jesus wins over His enemies by dying for them.

This does not seem like a very glorious concept to us.

Turning our cheeks, loving our enemies, and serving them seems like slavery more than anything!

Yet Jesus says **“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”**

Jesus shows where this all leads –

For Jesus came to give His life as a ransom for many.

He came not with force, but with death.

Earthly ears hear the word ‘death’ and think ‘defeat’.

But death isn’t the end of Jesus’ story, and it’s not the end of ours either.

Our death and our suffering on their own are in vain.

They’re empty.

They **ARE** defeat.

But if our death and suffering is attached to Christ

– to his suffering,

to his death,

to his victory over death,

and glory –

then suffering and death become our ally,

and the best tool we have in our toolboxes.

It’s as our last hymn says in stanza 3 –

*“Stand up, stand up for Jesus;*

*Stand in HIS strength ALONE.*

*The arm of flesh will fail you,*

*Ye dare not trust your own.*

*Put on the GOSPEL armor;*

*Each piece put on with prayer.*

*Where duty calls or danger,*

*be never wanting there.”*

Paul in Romans says that the baptism with which Jesus baptizes us,

unites us with His death and resurrection.

So, in our text for today when Jesus says that he will baptize us,

and that He will give us His cup to drink,

He’s giving His suffering and death to us.

The glory for which we strive in service to Him

only makes sense in view of the cross.

James eventually learned this lesson from his humbled Master,

that embracing suffering was the greatest tool in the toolbox.

As our reading from Acts shows, James was killed by Herod.

James was humbled to serve, to spread the Gospel,

Becoming the first one to die for the sake among the 12 apostles.

This may look like defeat to some,

But James gave His life, embraced suffering,

so that the life of others may be found.

That’s the right tool to use.

Herod operated by force, not mercy.

He used force, not mercy, to win over His enemies.

God doesn’t need us working by force like James and John wished to on that poor Samaritan town, or like Herod towards Jesus’s disciples,

because force is foreign to the work of Jesus

– it accomplishes the opposite of what He wants.

Force destroys enemies,

but Jesus wants to save them.

Force punishes enemies for their wrongdoings,

but Jesus seeks to forgive them.

Using force may look like victory over enemies,

but victory can only be attained through the suffering and death of Jesus.

So, God invites us to drink the cup of Jesus

and to remain in His baptism,

because this is how God works His way in us.

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