

Isaiah 53:4-12  
Hebrews 5:1-10  
Mark 10:35-45

<sup>35</sup>James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." <sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" <sup>39</sup>They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

James and John made a request we can all understand. They wanted to be honored. They went to Jesus and asked that one would sit at his left hand and one at his right hand. They didn't have any particular agenda, no concerns they wanted to address from the position they requested. They just wanted the position. It was a request for prestige and power. Jesus said, "That's not the way to greatness." Jesus wanted them to be great – but he told them greatness is to be had through service.

This is a familiar story and a familiar message. People looking for more honor and Jesus telling them to be servants and it reads like one more demand from a life of Christianity (that always seems to be asking for *something*.) The church wants good behavior, money, study, and now this...service.

I suggest that this teaching is not a demand. It could be the best news we've heard. This teaching could lead to a lot easier life.

What are the problems of our lives? What makes us unhappy? The most consistent annoyances I hear about are other people. People don't listen to us. They are always trying to get their own way. They never respect us. Sometimes it seems like people plan new ways to not listen to us. It causes endless anger and grief. I know people who hold grudges over these issues and have trouble sleeping.

Jesus has good news. He says, “Lay down the terrible burden of trying to control other people”.

If people don't respect you, if they don't listen to you, if they don't recognize that you are fit to sit at Jesus' right hand...don't allow that to hurt you. Your worth lies in other things.

You don't have to control others. Put away the obsession to let everyone know you are right. Leave the demand to have other people agree with you. The desire to control other people can be a great bondage.

Jesus offers to set us free.

It might be hard for us to accept this as good news. We are more comfortable with the idea of self-fulfillment and getting ahead. We are used to thinking of self-denial as a soul-crushing demand. But, that's not true. Self-denial is much more liberating than trying to manipulate other people. People try to make others do what they want in a great variety of ways – and all of them are hard. They all use a lot of energy.

There are bullies, and flatterers. People try to make others feel guilty or feel pity. These are all very different kinds of behavior, but they all try to accomplish the same thing. Manipulate others. Make people do what they want. It's a lot of work.

This message is very difficult to get across. Because it is so widespread that people try to control each other, as soon as we start talking about the use of flattery, or guilt, or threats, or self-pity, right away people start thinking, “That's right! That's exactly the way people treat me.” And we may go on to name some people in our minds we wish were here to hear how wrong they are. Or, if they are here, hope they are paying attention.

And then those people will know *I* was right all along...and *I* will be in a position of honor for being right. Possibly at the right hand of Jesus.

It makes it difficult for us to hear about the freedom of not being in power, freedom Jesus offers to us.

Jesus, this man whom we want to follow, Jesus died on a cross. He not only died a cross death, he lived a cross life. He lived in service. He always put others ahead of himself.

Jesus himself never sought to control anyone. He always gave people the freedom to choose if they would listen to him or not. If they agreed with him or not, Jesus never fumed at the people who did not follow him. He didn't walk around for years holding grudges. It is interesting that one of the ways we try to control others is by quoting the words of Jesus, yet Jesus never sought to control.

When we try to run other people's lives we are taking on responsibilities that even God won't take. You don't have to control other people. The good news for this morning is you are free of that burden.

It is not that Jesus took the old hierarchy of the powerful in control and turned it upside down so now the powerless are in control. No. Jesus did away with any hierarchy at all. No one is over anyone else. All are to serve each other. We serve – not because we occupy some station in life – but because

Jesus served. We are here because we want to live a life like Jesus' life. Jesus was a servant.

Jesus never tried to control. He spoke the truth and put it in the hands of those around him. He showed God's love and left it to anyone who would be loved. He will willingly take up the burden of our sins if we will give that burden to him. He will not take the burden of forcing people to act in any way.

He doesn't want you to have to bear that burden, either.

This has been called "self-denial". That's a good name for it. It does not mean groveling and self-hatred. Jesus calls us to self-denial without self-hatred. Indeed, Jesus' teaching made self-love a prerequisite for service. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Self-denial does not mean self-hatred anymore than Jesus would have hated himself when he served people. Self-denial means we don't have to control things. Our happiness does not depend on getting what we want.

Yes, we should know right from wrong. We should have deeply held convictions about how the world should be, but we don't have to be in control.

When we leave the attempt to be honored and it is no longer important to sit at Jesus' right hand or left and run things – then we will be free to serve. Notice there was nothing in James and John's request about what they wanted to do with this position of closeness to Jesus. They did not say, "Keep us close to you so we can show God's love to others." "Let us be near you so we can feel forgiveness and move into the world with the Gospel." "Teach us true things to tell other people to help them with their lives." Those would have been wonderful requests. There are some very good reasons to want to be close to Jesus. But James and John did not ask for those things. They wanted to be close to Jesus because it was a position of honor. They wanted control.

Jesus frees us. In self-denial we can value other people. Their ideas and their plans will become important to us. We can celebrate their successes and we will be genuinely sorry about their failures. We are free to consider their lives and their well being.

When we are giving up our own honor and prestige, the first place to start is with God. Submitting our lives to the will of God is so obvious a thing to do we might think it shouldn't even come up.

Yet, look at James and John in this morning's Gospel lesson. Two of the twelve apostles begin a conversation with Jesus by saying, "Do for us whatever we ask of you." They wanted agreement before they even made the request. This is not a prayer of "Thy will be done."

If two of the twelve apostles can fall into this temptation, we should not think that we are immune. Submission to God is the place to start, rather than thinking what plans we can make. Perhaps we should remember Thomas `a Kempis. He wrote that he started each morning with this prayer to God: "As you will; what you will; when you will."

There is great freedom in letting God control things.

Any guidings by God will put our lives in his service. We will be in service to our families, our neighbors, the community, this church.

To want to be so close to Jesus is the highest thing we could hope for. But Jesus is a servant. And when we are so close to a servant it will be to serve with him.

The burden of controlling and directing is ended. You're free. You can live at the right