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“What Do You Want Me To Do For You?”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?”:
REQUEST AND RELINQUISHMENT IN MARK 10.35-52

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“What Do You Want Me To Do For You?”

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REQUEST AND RELINQUISHMENT IN MARK 10.35-52

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE
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“What Do You Want Me To Do For You?”

Introduction

The gospels are replete with examples of individuals who approach Jesus with a specific request. Not only are these requests welcomed, but Jesus also instructs his followers on the importance of asking (Matt. 7:7-11; Luke 11:9-13). However, we also see in the gospels that not every request that is brought to Jesus is answered affirmatively. Why, then, the emphasis on asking? Does making requests of Jesus play a larger role than simply receiving or not receiving that which has been requested?

This paper will examine two accounts from the gospel of Mark where Jesus is approached with a specific request. In one account, the request is granted immediately. In the other, the petition is not fulfilled. Both accounts serve to reveal the nature of God’s authority in Jesus. In both accounts, the ones making the request are invited into greater participation in God’s plan of redemption. Through examining these accounts, this paper will argue that asking is not only important, but crucial, in order to follow Jesus to the cross where God’s work of restoration results in a complete reordering of power.

One account we will examine is the healing of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52). This story is noted for its placement within Mark’s gospel in closing out a section with a major focus on discipleship (8:22-10:52).¹ Scholarship has given much attention to the interpretation of Bartimaeus’ cry for mercy that identifies Jesus as the Son of David within this account. Very little scholarly attention, however, has focused directly on the significance of Jesus’ question and the importance of Bartimaeus’ answer that stands at the crux of the encounter.

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, “And He Followed Him: Miracles and Discipleship in Mark 10:46-52” *Semeia* 11 (1978): 115–45.

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In asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:51 NASB), Jesus requires the man to state his desire so that he can respond to his request. Jesus has recently asked this same question of the Sons of Zebedee (10:36), and this repetition invites further exploration of the significance of desire in discipleship in the context of these two accounts. Bartimaeus’ humble statement of desire presents him as one who perceives Jesus’ authority correctly and he receives his sight on the basis of his faith. His healing is subsumed in the greater outcome of the encounter: he follows Jesus on the Way.

The humble approach of Bartimaeus stands in stark contrast to the account that precedes it. The Sons of Zebedee approach Jesus brazenly, demanding Jesus grant what they ask of him. As Jesus asks the same question of the disciples that he later asks of Bartimaeus, their response reveals the irony that, although they have seen Jesus’ authority first-hand, they fail to perceive that the Way to his glory is not in seeking power for themselves but in sacrificial service and in submission to the will of God. Their current desire for power poses a threat to their discipleship and progress on the Way.

The Sons of Zebedee’s aspirations reveal their misperception that Jesus’ power is like that of earthly kings in their request for positions of prominence over others. The danger of such a quest for power is typified in Mark’s gospel in the character of Herod, who in his pursuit of earthly power, is shown to be slave to those he rules over and bound to fulfill requests against his will (6:14-29). Thus the request of the Sons of Zebedee reveals a misperception that could lead them to a dangerous misuse of power resulting in their own bondage and tyranny over others.

Such is not the way of Jesus, and Jesus’ reply offers a prescription for the healing of his disciples’ misguided desire for power in the paradoxical instructions of service and

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sacrifice. The request made by the Sons of Zebedee ultimately leads to further revelation of the nature of Jesus’ authority. The disciples’ desire for greatness is redirected toward kingdom purposes and the disciples are invited into greater participation in Jesus’ paradoxical mission. This mission will take them to the cross, where the ultimate authority of Christ will be revealed through the offering of his life as a ransom for many.

This thesis presents the expression of desire as a critical task of the disciple in participating in God’s work of restoration. Making requests of Jesus places one in a posture to receive greater revelation of the nature of Jesus’ authority (as seen in the Sons of Zebedee) and to receive of his power to restore (as seen in the story of Bartimaeus). It also argues that the expression of desire is to be coupled with a second crucial task: the relinquishment of any right to earthly power.

Together, these present an approach modeled by Jesus himself in prayer. Through Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, we see the ultimate example of expressing desire to God, while simultaneously relinquishing any right to human authority. The obedient humility of this posture makes way for the power of God to be revealed in him. In the same way, disciples are invited to follow Jesus’ example in humbly making requests known to God, while at the same time releasing any claim to earthly power in order to enter into participation in the restorative work of God in the world.

This study begins by locating the aforementioned accounts of the Sons of Zebedee and Bartimaeus within Mark’s gospel, noting the significance of the placement of these stories. It will then provide context regarding dynamics of power presented in the gospel that reveal the stark contrast between the order of earthly rule and the notably different authority revealed in the ministry of Jesus. It is against this backdrop that we will then be

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able to examine the role of desire in discipleship as seen in the accounts of the Sons of Zebedee and Bartimaeus. These accounts will form the basis of our study, in showing how the expression of desire and relinquishment of earthly power emerge in the narrative as critical tasks of discipleship. These themes will lead us to identify Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane as a model for disciples to follow. All together, these examples point to the cross as the place where Jesus must go, and the disciple is invited to follow, in order to participate in Jesus’ mission that will result in the complete reordering of power.

Placement of Stories within Mark’s Gospel

Before examining the accounts of the Sons of Zebedee and Bartimaeus, we will begin with a brief overview of the content and structure of Mark’s gospel in order to see where these accounts fit into the larger narrative. The aim of this gospel is to present Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah (1:1), or Anointed One of God, who brings the good news of the kingdom of God, and who calls and invites people to repentance and belief (1:15).

The gospel gives account of Jesus’ public ministry (1:16-8:21), the calling and appointing of his twelve disciples (1:14-20; 3:13-19), Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of God (4:1-34), and the varying reactions of people to the person and work of Jesus (1:27; 2:6-7, 12, 24; 3:2, 6, 10-11, 22, 30; 4:41; 5:15-17, 20, 42; 6:2-3, 14-16, 54-56; 7:37; 9:15). The narrative points to the cross as the way Jesus is going (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34), with the climax of the story in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus (chs. 14-16).

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Two major themes that emerge in Mark’s gospel are Christology and discipleship, as the narrative offers a portrayal of who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.² These themes are foundational as we examine the accounts of the Sons of Zebedee and Bartimaeus and consider how these stories build upon these themes and offer unique insight into the person and work of Jesus at a critical point in the narrative.

One way of viewing the structure of Mark’s gospel is as a drama with “Three Acts.”³ The narrative moves at a quick pace along with Jesus, with a focus on three main geographical locations. Act One gives account of Jesus’ public ministry in and around Galilee (1:16-8:21). Act Two takes place on the road to Jerusalem (8:22-10:52), and Act Three takes place in Jerusalem itself (11:1-15:47).⁴

The second act, the journey to Jerusalem, is a section in Mark’s gospel that is largely focused on the teachings of Jesus and is recognized as having a major focus on discipleship. The journey is bookended by two separate accounts in which Jesus heals a blind person (8:22-26; 10:46-52), emphasizing blindness and recovery of sight as important themes within this portion of the gospel.

These healing accounts provide a frame for the portrayal of the blindness of the disciples at this point in their journey, as they struggle to see Jesus accurately. Within this second act, Jesus clearly and repeatedly predicts his upcoming suffering and death to his disciples on three separate occasions (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34). Each time, the disciples

² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 23.

³ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 11.

⁴ Ibid.

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respond with misunderstanding (8:32; 9:32; 10:35-45), highlighting their persistent blindness in regards to Jesus’ forthcoming mission.

The accounts of the Sons of Zebedee and Bartimaeus are located at the end of this second act, immediately following Jesus’ third passion prediction (10:35-52). They usher in Act Three, where Jesus and his followers enter into Jerusalem. Together, these accounts point to the importance of correct perception of Jesus for those who seek to follow him, and highlight the relationship that exists between Christology and discipleship.⁵

This connection is most evident in the ‘activity’ of Jesus and the disciples: proper discipleship activity flows naturally from a proper understanding of Jesus’ identity.⁶ Conversely, a misperception of Jesus’ identity can lead to improper—and potentially destructive—activity. In particular, these accounts point to the issue of Jesus’ power and the contrasting way in which the Sons of Zebedee and Bartimaeus approach Jesus in light of the power and authority they believe to be his. Paradoxically, it is Bartimaeus—a blind man—who is shown to have unique insight into Jesus’ identity. Meanwhile the disciples, who have been eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry, make a request that exposes their blindness to the character of Jesus’ authority and the trajectory of his present mission.

This mission is what currently confounds Jesus’ disciples, who have walked so closely with him. They have seen the power of God at work in Jesus and are anticipating his coming glory. What they cannot yet see is that this mission will not lead to an

⁵ Vernon K. Robbins, “Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52) in the Marcan Theology,” *JBL* 92, no.2 (1973): 226.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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amassing of power, but will ultimately lead to Jesus’ relinquishment of any claim to human authority in order for God’s power to be revealed at the cross.

Jesus’ Power Revealed in Act One

In order to better understand the struggle of the disciples to correctly perceive Jesus’ power at this point in their journey, we will first look to Act One where their journey with Jesus begins and where the conflict between the authority of Jesus and the earthly rulers begins to emerge in the narrative.

The power of Jesus is revealed throughout Act One in his teaching, authority over unclean spirits, power to heal sickness and disease, and jurisdiction in pronouncing the forgiveness of sins (1:21-45; 2:5; 3:5, 10-11; 4:39; 5:13, 41-42). People recognize Jesus’ authority as different and respond with amazement (1:22, 27; 2:12; 5:20; 6:2, 51; 9:15; 10:24). This new brand of authority is made manifest in service to others that brings about healing and deliverance.⁷ It ultimately effects and represents a complete reordering of power: the last become first, outsiders become insiders, and the powerless become the recipients of God’s power to bring about restoration.

This reordering of power seen in Jesus’ ministry is a manifestation of the coming kingdom of God, which Jesus announces from the outset of Mark’s gospel (1:15). Through Jesus’ ministry, the reign of God emerges and becomes real, as Jesus’ acts and teachings illustrate the paradoxical nature of the kingdom of God.⁸ It is paradoxical

⁷ Narry F. Santos, *Slave of All: The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 229.

⁸ Eugene M. Boring, *Mark* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2006), 53.

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because it challenges and overturns the “natural expectations and values of disciples and opponents alike (10:13-27).”⁹ While Jesus’ authority is distinct, his ministry nevertheless demonstrates power that—if wrongly perceived—could look a lot like the power of this world. Thus, the surprising way in which the rule and reign of God becomes manifest through the ministry of Jesus is often confounding to his disciples (4:41; 6:37, 49-51), and provokes anger in those who oppose him (3:5; 7:1-5).

The disciples are portrayed as not merely witnesses to Jesus’ authority throughout Act One, but they themselves are conferred with like power. At Jesus’ instruction, they are sent forth to preach the message of repentance, to cast out demons and heal the sick (6:7-13). They are invited into participation in the ministry of Jesus as mediators of God’s mercy,¹⁰ and their ministry likewise results in healing and restoration for those who are in need (6:13, 30). The power of their ministry comes from God and is for the benefit of others.

James and John, the Sons of Zebedee, make their first appearance early on in Mark’s Gospel (1:19). They are fishermen by trade who are called by Jesus to become fishers of people and who follow him without delay (1:20). The response of the brothers reflects their immediate and willing obedience to his call.¹¹ They have been with Jesus since the outset of his public ministry and are eyewitnesses to his work.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 30.

¹⁰ Abraham Smith, “Tyranny Exposed: Mark’s Typological Characterization of Herod Antipas (Mark 6:14-29)” *Biblical Interpretation* 14, no. 3 (2006): 285.

¹¹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 69.

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The text offers evidence that James and John, along with Peter, were three disciples with whom Jesus shared a more intimate relationship.¹² They were invited to uniquely witness Jesus’ power and glory (5:37; 9:2). Despite their initial obedience and close proximity to Jesus, the unfolding narrative reveals that even Jesus’ closest disciples are not immune to the struggle to correctly perceive and respond to the nature of his authority made manifest in mercy and service (6:35-37; 7:17-19; 8:14-21). Nor are they immune to the allure of earthly power and the temptation to conflate their perception of Jesus’ power with that of earthly rule. While they correctly perceive Jesus as Messiah (8:28), they struggle to grasp what God’s emerging kingdom will require, and how vastly different Jesus’ reign will be from that of other kings (8:32; 9:33-34; 10:35-37).

The Order of Earthly Rule

The disciples are not the only ones who struggle with their perception of Jesus, and Act One reveals the emerging clash between two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the order of earthly rule. This conflict is most clearly seen in Mark’s portrayal of the Temple elite, Israel’s teachers of the law. As Jesus’ public ministry draws many to him (1:32, 37, 40, 45; 2:2, 13, 15), it likewise quickly brings him into conflict with the religious authorities (2:16-17; 3:21-23; 7:1-5).

The temple elite held prominent positions within Jewish society. These religious figures—scribes, Pharisees, elders, and chief priests—occupied positions of authority within the community that included religious jurisdiction, but extended far beyond that. The highest in rank were the chief priests, who served as political officials and were

¹² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 196.

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responsible to Rome for maintaining public order.¹³ “The chiefest of chief priests, the high priest, was the most prestigious religious authority in Second Temple Jewish Palestine, being the supreme officiate at the Jerusalem Temple and the head of its vast economic, social, and political power”¹⁴ The temple elite were therefore very entwined with the political power of Rome and held positions that were high on the pinnacle of power within society.¹⁵

The religious authorities were employed as a means of indirect rule for the political structure and were used to carry out the interests of the empire.¹⁶ As a result, these leaders were often complicit in practices that led to the oppression of those at the bottom of the societal structure. The combination of religious ideology and political patronage frequently legitimized the exploitation of those under their authority.¹⁷ This exploitation was often economic, through accumulating tithes and offerings.¹⁸ Thus the religious figures held power and authority over others in society in matters that were religious, economic, social and political.

¹³ Joel Marcus, *Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries: Mark 8-16* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1102.

¹⁴ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1102.

¹⁵ Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Sociopolitical Reading of Mark's Gospel*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 5.

¹⁶ Ernest van Eck, “Mission, Identity and Ethics in Mark: Jesus, The Patron for Outsiders.” *HTS* 69 (2013), 1-13 [4].

¹⁷ Van Eck, “Mission, Identity and Ethics in Mark,” 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

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These religious figures comprise the majority of Jesus’ human opponents in Mark’s Gospel.¹⁹ While the scribes and Pharisees are noted more frequently in the earlier part of Mark (1:22; 2:6-24; 3:6, 22; 7:1-5; 8:11-31; 9:11-14), the chief priests are the predominant opponents from chapter 10 onward through the passion narrative (10:33; 11:18; 11:27; 14:10-55; 15:1-31).²⁰ The scribes and Pharisees were “deeply devoted to the Law and strictly governed their own life by the interpretation passed down in the scribal tradition.”²¹ They viewed themselves as defenders of the holiness of God and sought to maintain standards of conduct they considered important for righteousness.

The scribes are initially mentioned in Mark 1:22 (as a negative contrast to the authority of Jesus), and they first appear on the scene in person in 2:6-7 with clear objection to Jesus’ ministry.²² Through the “reasoning of their hearts” they charge Jesus with blasphemy (2:7), the most serious of sins.²³ Their perception of Jesus is that he improperly and presumptuously casts himself in a role that only God can fill. The scribes’ position of authority in matters of the law causes them to look upon the activity of Jesus and his disciples as improper, even blasphemous. They see the power in Jesus’ ministry; yet they fail to perceive this authority as coming from God.

There is irony in Mark’s portrayal of these teachers of the law as among those who are most blind to the work of God made manifest in the person of Jesus. It is in the

¹⁹ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1101.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1102.

²¹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 104.

²² Boring, *Mark*, 77.

²³ *Ibid.*

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very act of seeking to protect their own position of authority as defenders of God’s law that the scribes fail to see who Jesus is, and their misguided focus becomes the basis of Jesus’ critique of them later in the gospel.

As the narrative continues, the misperception of the scribes and Pharisees is portrayed in their objection to the actions of Jesus and his disciples. Jesus continues in his ministry to the sick, the outcast and the sinner, and the Pharisees become increasingly outraged at Jesus’ failure to comply with their religious standards (2:16; 3:22; 7:1-5).

Their concerns frequently have to do with issues of ritual purity or the failure of Jesus and his disciples to adhere to other traditional rules or religious regulations (2:16; 3:2; 7:1). From the Pharisees’ point of view, Jesus’ words and actions undermine their interpretation of the law, their piety, and their authority.²⁴ The scribes and Pharisees, while zealous for the Law, nevertheless prove to be bound and blinded by the earthly system of power over which they have authority, and they plot to destroy Jesus (3:6).

The conflict of authority presented in Mark’s gospel is by no means one-sided. While the teachers of the law confront Jesus in regards to his apparent neglect of the law, Jesus counters with his own critique of the scribes and Pharisees. He indicts them as hypocrites (7:6), noting the “disjunction between public pretense and genuine intent” of their actions (7:9-13).²⁵ Their concern for their religious rules has blinded them from seeing the work of God, and their self-serving practice has kept them from being concerned for the wellbeing of others (3:1-4, 22). They have been primarily focused on

²⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 124.

²⁵ C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 175.

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external correctness, with rules and regulations, all the while enjoying their positions of authority and honor within the community (12:38).

Ultimately, this posture has resulted in neglecting the most important commands of God (12:30-31) while holding firm to human tradition and earthly structures of power (7:8). Their religious efforts have become a form of lip service, while their hearts are far from God and the things of God (7:6-7). Thus Jesus’ pointed critique of the scribes and Pharisees lies not only in their desire for positions of honor and respect, but in their concurrent religious pride and neglect of those who are in need (12:38-40).

Jesus’ controversy with the scribes and Pharisees offers a portrayal of the clash between the nature of the coming kingdom of God and the order of earthly rule. The kind of authority that comes from God is revealed in the ministry of Jesus as the power to heal, restore, and set free. Such authority regards the needs of others and is made manifest in mercy. It is characterized by liberation and restoration. The authority revealed in the ministry of Jesus is not power amassed, but rather power dispensed on behalf of and for the benefit of others.

In contrast, the scribes and Pharisees envisioned a righteous society to be upheld by maintaining authority over others, not dispensing power on behalf of others. While they exercised this authority in the name of God, their rule was ultimately bound to maintaining earthly structures of power. Such earthly rule is characterized by pride, fear, and control, as seen in the scribes’ desire for positions of honor while using their authority to rule over and exploit others (12:40). Ultimately, the conflict that emerges between Jesus and the religious establishment in Act One exposes these competing

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visions of the way in which a righteous society is formed,²⁶ and these competing visions are ultimately incompatible with one another.

The disjuncture between the reign of God and the order of earthly rule provides an important backdrop for understanding the dynamics that continue to reverberate through Act Two, as Jesus and his disciples make their journey to Jerusalem. While on this journey, Jesus openly tells his disciples where this conflict will lead: to his rejection, suffering, death, and ultimately his resurrection (8:31-32; 9:31; 10:33-34). The disciples, who have seen Jesus’ power and authority first-hand, are now in the difficult position of seeking to understand how this journey could be leading Jesus—not to a position of power—but to a place of suffering and death.

The disciples are now faced with the paradoxical nature of the coming kingdom of God and their misguided expectations regarding Jesus’ glory. They are likewise confronted with their own desire for power and position (9:34; 10:36, 41), revealing that the conflict between the reign of God and the order of earthly rule is not merely an external threat from Jesus’ opponents, but one that exists amongst his closest followers. This threat is seen most clearly in the account of the Sons of Zebedee near the end of Act Two, as they approach Jesus with a specific—and somewhat surprising—request (10:37).

The Request of the Sons of Zebedee

It is on the heels of Jesus’ third passion prediction that James and John approach Jesus with a brazen request. The presumptive nature of their approach signals warning to the reader, as the brothers first attempt to gain approval from Jesus without actually

²⁶ Black, *Mark*, 93.

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disclosing what they want: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” (10:35b). Their initial strategy is, in essence, to obtain a blank check in getting Jesus to agree to their request before they say what it is.²⁷ Their timing seems odd, as Jesus has just spoken of his suffering, death and resurrection, and one might expect a more somber mood amongst his disciples.

Unsurprisingly, Jesus does not sign off on the brothers’ veiled petition. His response takes the form of a question that requires the disciples to name their desire in order that he can respond to their appeal. In reply to their demanding approach, Jesus probes for further information as he asks the Sons of Zebedee, “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:36).

At this prompt, the disciples state their specific request: “Grant that we may sit, one on your right and one on your left, in your glory” (10:37). The precise meaning of the request is uncertain, but it comes across as an “unbridled petition for patronage.”²⁸ This kind of a bid would have been common within the culture, as patron-client relationships constituted the main bond of society in the first century Roman world.²⁹ Such relationships were not legal or contractual, but were nevertheless strongly binding associations between persons of unequal status.³⁰

²⁷ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 751.

²⁸ Black, *Mark*, 231.

²⁹ John H. Elliott, “Patronage and Clientelism in Early Christian Society: A Short Reading Guide,” *Forum* 3,4 (1987): 39.

³⁰ Bruce J. Malina, “Patron and Client: The Analogy Behind Synoptic Theology,” *Forum* 4 (1988), 4.

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Patronage involved the “reciprocal exchange of ‘goods and services’ between superior ‘patrons’ and their inferior ‘clients.’”³¹ The patron would use his or her influence on behalf a client in exchange for the promised loyalty and support of the client. Thus the relationship offered something of value to each partner, creating relationships with a high degree of obligation and dependency.³² While not explicitly stated, the request made by the Sons of Zebedee is one that assumes Jesus’ authority along with an implied obligation to his followers. They are approaching Jesus as a patron through whom they, as clients, can secure power and privilege for themselves.

The specific referent of their request can only be made by conjecture. Some scholars propose their aim was to be granted the best seats at the Messianic banquet (cf. Matthew 22:1-10; Luke 14:15-24).³³ Other scholars suggest the disciples were seeking positions of authority at the coming of God’s kingdom,³⁴ with the disciples sitting at Jesus’ side when he takes his place as judge over all (8:38; 13:26-27; 14:62; cf. Mt 19:28, 25:31-46).³⁵

While the text does not offer further insight into this matter, what is clear is that the appeal has to do with the disciples securing positions of power and preeminence in the kingdom they believe is close at hand. The Sons of Zebedee have grasped the royal

³¹ Elliott, “Patronage and Clientelism,” 39.

³² *Ibid.*, 42.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Luke T. Johnson and Todd C. Penner, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 174.

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connotations of Jesus’ mission as Messiah of God’s coming kingdom (8:27-29; 9:1) and are envisioning not only a particular means of fulfillment for Jesus, but for his loyal followers as well.³⁶

The request made by the Sons of Zebedee reveals both a correct as well as an incorrect view of Jesus’ role.³⁷ That Jesus has authority is not in question within this passage, and the Sons of Zebedee are clearly approaching Jesus in light of the authority they presume to be his. While they are correct in seeing Jesus as the Messiah, they still fail to comprehend *how* he will be the Messiah, and what kind of Messiah he will be (8:32; 9:33-34, 38; 10:35-37).³⁸

In presenting their request, James and John reveal that along with their desire to follow Jesus is a concomitant desire to ensure positions of honor for themselves. Their request reveals the irony that, despite their direct witness to Jesus’ authority made manifest in service and the predictions of his upcoming suffering and death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), they still fail to perceive the way to Jesus’ glory is not to be found in seeking power for themselves. Their current desire for power poses a threat to their discipleship and progress on the Way.

Jesus’ Response to the Content of the Request

Jesus first responds to the content of the disciples’ request with the truth that they do not know what they are asking (10:38). What ought to be clear to them by now—but is

³⁶ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 378.

³⁷ Stein, *Mark*, 485.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

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not—is that Jesus’ glory will be in his death on the cross. There is irony in their request, as the Sons of Zebedee are essentially asking Jesus that they be crucified along with him.³⁹ In requesting the positions on his right and on his left in his glory, the disciples are asking to participate in the suffering and death that await Jesus in Jerusalem. Only they do not know that is what they are requesting.

In the dialogue that follows, Jesus “accepts their desire to share his destiny, but offers a more realistic view of what that will mean.”⁴⁰ He does so by asking them the question, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (10:38b). Jesus’ language here is metaphorical and is yet another way that he points to the suffering and death that await him in Jerusalem.

The image of ‘the cup’ is seen in the scriptures as a metaphor for what God has in store for someone.⁴¹ At times, the cup is indicative of blessing (Ps 16:5, 23:5, 116:13), but more frequently this metaphor is representative of the suffering associated with God’s judgment or wrath (Ps 75:9; Is 57:17-22; Jer 49:12; Ezek 23:31-34).⁴² Likewise, in using the term ‘baptism’ Jesus may be creating a new metaphor by “drawing on his disciples’ familiarity with the dramatic physical act of John’s baptism, but using it ...to depict the suffering and death into which he was soon to be ‘plunged.’”⁴³ Together, the cup and the

³⁹ Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark’s Gospel: Text and Subtext* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 161-163.

⁴⁰ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 414.

⁴¹ Mary Healy and Peter S. Williamson, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 212.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴³ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 417.

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baptism point to Jesus’ passion, and present a challenge to the request made by the Sons of Zebedee.⁴⁴

The disciples are undaunted by these images, and they affirm that indeed they are able to do these things. Despite their present misunderstanding of this exchange, their answer is congruent with their destiny, and Jesus accedes to this as he says, “The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized” (10:39b). In saying this, Jesus affirms the role of the disciples in the unfolding of God’s plan.

The disciples will indeed be participants in Jesus’ mission. Jesus’ reply indicates the magnitude of their involvement in sharing in his cup and baptism. “For [Jesus], they are not elitist realities reserved for himself. Being baptized with the same baptism is, in fact, a distinguishing feature of true discipleship. Without it there can be no participation in God’s rule. Furthermore, drinking the same cup involves them in his life, the life that he will offer up for them and their liberation.”⁴⁵ Yet the request of the Sons of Zebedee reveals they are currently blind to the sacrifice their participation in God’s kingdom will entail.

The request of James and John contradicts the trajectory of Jesus’ mission and the nature of Jesus’ authority. Although Jesus has just affirmed their destiny, he continues with addressing their specific petition and in so doing “undermines the whole premise on which their request was based, that status in the kingdom of God can be bestowed as a

⁴⁴ Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, 212.

⁴⁵ Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, 175.

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favor, or even earned by loyalty and self-sacrifice.”⁴⁶ God’s kingdom does not operate according to the earthly system of patronage or benefaction whereby favors are done out of obligation or as ‘payment’ for loyalty and honor.

Jesus’ mission has not and will not be about declaring his own authority or establishing a pyramid of power. On the contrary, Jesus’ work has been to make visible the power of God in obedience to the authority of God. His submission to God’s sovereignty is implied in his answer to the disciples’ request. The seats they seek are not his to grant, but are for those for whom they have been prepared (10:40).

Upon hearing this exchange, the other disciples become indignant, and Jesus gathers the Twelve together (10:41-42). The response of the other disciples is not presented as a reaction to the self-seeking nature of the request made by the Sons of Zebedee. Rather, it reveals that the concern of rank and status is common amongst them.⁴⁷ The desire for earthly power is a malady they all presently share.

Jesus Confronts the Disciples’ Desire for Power

The exposure of this desire for power is significant as Jesus and his disciples are about to enter into Jerusalem, where the conflict between the authority of God and that of earthly rule will come to a climax. Jesus’ response to his followers is threefold. He begins with the example of leadership seen in the rulers of the Gentiles, who amass power and use their authority to lord it over others.⁴⁸ He then confronts this order of earthly rule

⁴⁶ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 414.

⁴⁷ Robert C. Tannehill, “Tension in Synoptic Sayings and Stories,” *Interpretation* 34, no. 2 (1980), 150.

⁴⁸ Stein, *Mark*, 487.

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with the vocation of the servant, overturning his disciples’ current expectations by redefining greatness in God’s kingdom.⁴⁹ True greatness in God’s kingdom is not realized through the amassing of power, but is obtained through giving up all claims to conventional authority through deliberate acts of service and sacrifice.⁵⁰ Ultimately, Jesus points to the loss of his own life as the embodiment of this new scale of values and the model for his disciples to follow.⁵¹ It is in the relinquishment of any claim to earthly power that the power of God will finally be revealed in Jesus’ death on the cross.

Jesus refers to the “rulers of the Gentiles” as an illustration of a form of authority his disciples are familiar with. He states, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them” (10:42). The critique of the Gentile rulers is in regards to their oppressive exploitation of power, the flaunting of authority rather than its beneficial exercise.⁵²

The disciples are aware and have experienced the effects of such rulers, whose authority results in oppression and exploitation rather than effecting good for those over whom they rule (6:14-29; 15:1-5). They have had the experience of being under the political power of Rome, and have encountered the way in which this kind of rule had influenced and infiltrated the religious establishment as well (12:38-40).⁵³

⁴⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 382.

⁵⁰ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 755.

⁵¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 415.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 419.

⁵³ As Van Eck summarizes, “The priestly elite acted as the patron of God and the clients of Rome” (“Mission, Identity and Ethics in Mark,” 4).

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The codes of patronage were pervasive and foundational to creating and sustaining pyramids of power where the individuals at the top would benefit at the expense of those lower in rank. Patron-client relations were frequently characterized by an overarching quality of kinship that only fueled exploitative practices. The end result of such relations was frequently the oppression of the powerless for the benefit of the powerful, all masked by the codes of loyalty set forth by the patronage system.⁵⁴

The disciples' present quest for power is aimed toward securing a place on the upper end of such a pyramidal structure. Given their current perception of what God's coming kingdom will look like, it is understandable that they would desire to have a higher position within such a system rather than lower. The ultimate problem with such earthly structures of rule, however, is that most often neither the rulers nor the people who are ruled over are truly free. The reader of Mark's Gospel has already been exposed to this conundrum in the character of King Herod, who enters the narrative in Act One.

The Example of Herod

Those Mark's gospel describes as 'rulers' surprisingly have little power, as they are controlled by the people they supposedly rule over.⁵⁵ Mark's portrayal of Herod earlier on in Act One provides an illustration of this in the account of the beheading of John the Baptist. This story shows the entrapment of earthly structures of power, and reveals the irony of Herod's powerlessness despite his presumed position of authority.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Alberto De Mingo Kaminouchi, *“But It Is Not So Among You”*: *Echoes of Power in Mark 10.32-45* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 163.

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Mark’s Gospel refers to Herod as ‘king.’ This title is historically inaccurate, as Herod was not actually a king, but “a lower ranking figure in the political scene of the Roman Empire.”⁵⁶ The Gospel of Matthew and Luke both refer to Herod as a tetrarch (Matt. 14:1; Luke 3:1), indicating that he had governance over only a quarter of a region. While this does not dismiss the possibility that the term “king” could have accurately reflected a popular view of Herod, there is irony in Mark’s portrayal of Herod in 6:17-29 as an impetuous king who makes rash promises regarding a kingdom that is not actually his to begin with.⁵⁷ Mark gives account of the events surrounding the beheading of John the Baptist, a story that portrays Herod’s flaunting of power that ultimately leads him to act against his own will in order to fulfill the wish of one of his subjects.

John the Baptist had been thrown into prison on account of his condemnation of Herod’s marriage to Herodias, saying that it was not lawful for Herod to have his brother’s wife (6:17-18). Because of this, Herodias held a grudge against John and wanted him to be put to death (6:19). Her wish was not granted, however, and Mark’s Gospel states that this was because Herod himself was fearful of John. He recognized him as a “righteous and holy man,” and therefore chose to keep him safe (6:19-20).

Yet, when Herod throws a lavish banquet for himself on his birthday, the daughter of Herodias comes and dances and pleases Herod so much that he makes a rash promise to the girl in front of all his guests: “Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you.” And he swore to her, “Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom” (6:22-23).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 175.

⁵⁷ Smith, “Tyranny Exposed,” 266.

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One can hear echoes of Herod’s ill-advised approach to power in the request made to Jesus by the Sons of Zebedee (“we want You to do for us *whatever we ask of You*” [10:35b]). Just as the disciples had sought a blank check in their request of Jesus, here Herod hands such a blank check to one of his subjects in this account, promising to fulfill ‘whatever’ is asked of him—up to half his kingdom—without constraint. The danger of such a promise quickly becomes evident within the narrative.

The daughter of Herodias consults her mother before presenting her desire to the king. When she returns with the request for the head of John the Baptist, Herod is faced with an ironic dilemma. While he, as ‘king,’ holds the power to release John the Baptist and to spare his life, he has just made a pledge to a young girl that now binds him. It is the very flaunting of his power that has brought about this conundrum of whether he will now act against his own will in order to fulfill the request that he himself has just prompted.

Because of his pride, his fear of the people, and his desire to protect his position, Herod gives in to the girl’s wish. His silent acquiescence is spelled out in Mark’s account. “And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her” (6:26). Herod’s original desire to keep John the Baptist safe is overruled by his desire to save face in front of his subjects.

While Herod, as a patron, has both the influence and desire to protect John, he nevertheless acts in accordance with the wish of one of his clients in order to protect his own honor. “What forces the king to act is the very system of power over which he reigns.”⁵⁸ His flaunting of authority has led him to make a rash promise that ultimately

⁵⁸ De Mingo Kaminouchi, “*But It Is Not So Among You*,” 177.

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leads him to betray his own desire and to exercise his power—not to protect—but to take away the life of a righteous man.

This account of Herod exposes the danger of earthly pursuits of power. Through this story, the reader can see that this ‘king’ is actually slave to those he rules over. His position on the pyramid of power has not liberated him, but rather bound him to act in accordance with the wishes of his subjects.

“But It Shall Not Be So Among You”

While Herod gets tangled in the system of power over which he supposedly rules, the ministry of Jesus seeks to liberate people from the oppression that comes as a result of such systems. He points to “those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles” in order to forbid his disciples from participating in leadership that is marked by domination and control of others. Jesus’ goal is “nothing less than the liberation of all human beings from the forces of domination, and it cannot be achieved by occupying that position alone and perpetuating the power and privilege which it bestows.”⁵⁹ The disciples’ perception that the ministry of Jesus will culminate in taking up positions of power over others is altogether false.

The disciples have yet to grasp the way in which Jesus’ mission is not about overtaking, but overturning such structures in order to bring about redemption and restoration.⁶⁰ Jesus is about to present a shockingly different approach to subverting this order of earthly rule. He confronts earthly rule with the paradoxical assertion that true

⁵⁹ Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, 173.

⁶⁰ Boring, *Mark*, 302.

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greatness in God’s kingdom is not found through the amassing of power, but rather through dispensing power in deliberate acts of service and sacrifice.

Having directed the disciples’ attention to the order of earthly rule seen in the rulers of the Gentiles, Jesus emphatically rejects this approach to conventional leadership for his own followers.⁶¹ This rings even stronger for the reader, who has been privy to the example of Herod’s empty authority earlier on in the narrative. Jesus exhorts his disciples: “But it shall not be so among you” (10:43). His definitive pronouncement makes it clear that “this world’s construction of authority, which James and John have projected onto the end time (v.37), is altogether erroneous.”⁶² Contrary to their current concerns and pursuits, the disciples are now being called to relinquish their desire for earthly positions of power and are being invited to participate in a radical redefinition of authority.

Jesus confronts the disciples’ present desire for earthly rule with the vocation of the servant.⁶³ “But whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be slave of all” (10:43-44). Jesus’ redefinition of authority reveals that leadership within the coming kingdom of God does not involve being a master over others at all, but rather involves taking up the role of a servant or a slave.

⁶¹ Adam Winn, “Tyrant or Servant?: Political Ideology and Mark 10.42-45,” *JSNT* 36, no. 1 (June 2014), 325.

⁶² Black, *Mark*, 233.

⁶³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 382.

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The words servant (*diakanos*) and slave (*doulos*) are parallel in this passage and together convey the idea of one whose actions are not aimed at fulfilling his or her own interests but are directed towards the service of others.⁶⁴ Jesus counters his disciples’ quest for positions of prominence with the call to intentionally assume roles distinctly void of any rank over others. The call for Jesus’ disciples to become “slaves of all” was an alarming proposition for Jesus’ followers to relinquish any claim to human authority in order to be about the business of serving others.

The order of life for followers of Jesus is not to be determined by rank and status, but rather is to be “love expressed in the form of service.”⁶⁵ In this way, Jesus appeals to his disciples’ desire for greatness and preeminence, directing their desires towards actions that would ultimately benefit others and away from the temptation to assume positions of power over others.

This is not the first time that the disciples have heard the call to become servants of all (cf. 9:35). But Jesus is not done with his teaching. He is about to make the most monumental revelation of the nature his mission to this point in their journey together. Up to now, Jesus has clearly predicted his forthcoming suffering and death, but he has not explained why this must take place. Jesus now makes clear that his upcoming death is not a meaningless tragedy, but rather a necessary part of God’s plan of redemption and restoration.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Boring, *Mark*, 302.

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Jesus’ teaching reaches its climax as he points to himself as the ultimate example of authority expressed through service and the model for his disciples to follow as he says: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (10:45). The disciples’ call to servanthood is rooted and grounded in Jesus’ own mission that will lead him to his death on the cross. His mission will by no means reach fulfillment in the amassing of earthly power. Rather, it will be brought about through Jesus’ relinquishment of any right to earthly authority in the offering up of his life. Jesus speaks of his own service-unto-death as the basis of his instructions to his followers.

Yet, Jesus’ example is not just a model for his disciples to follow. While it is indeed an example, it is also more. For the first time, Jesus clearly states the redemptive purpose of his upcoming mission: to give his life as a ransom for many. The word “ransom” is of particular importance as it clearly points to the saving power of Jesus’ death (cf. 14:24).⁶⁷ This word is used to indicate a payment made to secure release, either from slavery or captivity.⁶⁸ Thus Jesus does not present himself as a new master, but rather as a servant, whose service unto death results in the release of others from their enslavement.⁶⁹ Jesus’ death on the cross is the ultimate example of love expressed in service, in giving up his life as “a ransom for many” (10:45).

The Culmination of the Account-Revelation of Jesus’ Mission

⁶⁷ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 757.

⁶⁸ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 420.

⁶⁹ Black, *Mark*, 233.

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The request made by the Sons of Zebedee at the outset of this account ultimately culminates in the greatest revelation of the nature of Jesus’ mission in the whole of Mark’s Gospel. The disciples’ request makes way for Jesus to address their misguided desires. Not only does Jesus provide correction, he also meets his followers in the place of their greatest misunderstanding with even greater revelation of the redemptive purpose of his mission.

This passage points to the expression of desire as a critical task of the disciple in order to be brought into fullness of participation in God’s work of restoration. In bringing their desire into dialogue with Jesus, the disciples place themselves in a posture to receive correction and revelation in regards to the true nature of Jesus’ authority. Their desire for earthly power is confronted with the paradoxical call to serve.

In receiving this call, the disciples are faced with a second task that is critical in order for them to follow Jesus’ example: the relinquishment of any right to earthly power. Both the expression of desire, as well as the relinquishment of any right to earthly authority is critical for participation in Jesus’ forthcoming mission as he and his disciples make their way into Jerusalem.

The Request of Bartimaeus

Before they enter into Jerusalem, Mark’s Gospel includes an account that illustrates Jesus’ authority made manifest in service in the healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus. On the heels of the request made by the Sons of Zebedee, the story of Bartimaeus offers a paradoxical portrayal of a blind man whose request reveals his unique insight into the nature of Jesus’ mission.

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Jesus and his disciples have continued on their journey, and are on their way out of Jericho when they pass by a blind man who is sitting by the side of the road begging (10:46). It is likely due to his physical condition that Bartimaeus has had to resort to seeking alms, and his status as a beggar would have placed him at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid of Roman Palestine.⁷⁰ At the bottom of this pyramid were those in society deemed ‘expendable’—vagrants, thieves, outlaws, and beggars.⁷¹ Thus, while Bartimaeus’ ailment is indeed physical, the social implications of his condition extend far beyond that.

Within first century Mediterranean culture the concept of sight was recognized as an important aspect of one’s influence and power within society.⁷² The eye was understood to be not only an instrument of vision but also a means of interpersonal communication. For someone who was blind, all such forms of social contact were cut off.⁷³ Such a person was thereby separated from social interactions that carried tremendous weight in a culture that revolved around honor and shame. This separation in essence would render a person void of any influence in society. For these reasons, Bartimaeus’ condition was much more than a physical ailment; it was a symbol of his exclusion from society and indicative of his state of utter powerlessness.

⁷⁰ Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, 177.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Santiago Guijarro Oporto, “Healing Stories and Medical Anthropology: A Reading of Mark 10:46-52,” *BTB* 30, no. 3 (September 2000), 108.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 109.

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Mark’s Gospel states, “When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’”(10:47). Knowledge of Jesus’ healing ministry was certainly widespread and Bartimaeus’ plea suggests that he, too, had heard of Jesus’ work (3:7-8). Bartimaeus’ cry—if not explicitly stated in the text—nevertheless implies his conviction about Jesus formed on the basis of what he had heard, as well as his hope that Jesus would do for him what he had done for others.⁷⁴

What is unique about Bartimaeus’ petition is that it is the only time in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus is addressed with the title ‘Son of David.’⁷⁵ Apart from Peter’s confession identifying Jesus as the Christ (8:29), Bartimaeus is only the second person in the narrative to address Jesus with a Christological title.⁷⁶ This title literally means a descendent of David (see Matt 1:20), but “for Mark’s readers, the most likely understanding of the title ‘Son of David’ would have been as a reference to the promised royal descendent of Israel’s greatest king, Jesus Christ, the long awaited Son of David.”⁷⁷ One of the promises associated with the coming of this Messiah was the opening of the eyes of the blind (Is. 29:18, 35:5; Luke 4:18),⁷⁸ a promise carrying obvious significance for Bartimaeus.

⁷⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 387.

⁷⁵ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 423.

⁷⁶ Boring, *Mark*, 305.

⁷⁷ Stein, *Mark*, 494.

⁷⁸ Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, 217.

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Some scholars are reluctant to conclude that Bartimaeus’ use of this title indicates his recognition of Jesus as the Messiah.⁷⁹ However, the use of this title, seen in conjunction with the specific request Bartimaeus is about to make of Jesus offers evidence that Bartimaeus has heard of Jesus’ works, has believed in his authority to heal, and has come to a conviction regarding who Jesus is. “Nothing in the narrative indicates that Bartimaeus’ understanding of Jesus’ identity is defective, and in fact Jesus himself praises his faith (10:52).”⁸⁰ Because of this, it is compelling to consider that Bartimaeus’ use of this title could in fact be a confession of his faith in Jesus as Messiah. Despite his physical blindness, Bartimaeus reveals unique insight into the power of God at work in the person of Jesus.

In contrast to the brazen approach of the Sons of Zebedee, the cry of Bartimaeus reflects a humble plea for mercy. The phrase “have mercy on me” appears frequently in the Psalms as an appeal for mercy on behalf of the afflicted (Ps. 4:1; 6:2; 41:4, 10; 51:1; 109:26; 123:3).⁸¹ Given Bartimaeus’ context, his appeal may be for the mercy of God to be extended to him through the healing ministry of Jesus.⁸²

His cry provokes the rebuke of ‘many’ who sternly tell him to be quiet (10:48). Their rebuke is likely unrelated to the Christological title used by Bartimaeus, and more

⁷⁹ Lane notes, “If the request to see reflects a messianic conviction that Jesus is the one through whom the promises of Isa. 35:4-5; 61:1 are fulfilled, this is not made explicit in the text,” (*The Gospel According to Mark*, 388).

⁸⁰ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 759.

⁸¹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 387.

⁸² *Ibid.*

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about their inability to grasp that Jesus would pause to respond to an appeal coming from an impoverished beggar.⁸³

Despite the rebuke of the crowd, Bartimaeus’ plea reaches the ears of Jesus. Jesus responds to Bartimaeus’ cry for mercy with a call—extended through the same persons who just moments before have rebuked Bartimaeus to be silent. “Call him,” Jesus says (10:49). With this instruction, the voices surrounding Bartimaeus turn from rebuke to encouragement, saying, “Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you” (10:49). Bartimaeus’ eagerness is clearly portrayed in the text, as he throws aside his cloak, jumps to his feet and comes to Jesus (10:50).

Jesus’ Response to the Cry of Bartimaeus

Jesus answers the cry of Bartimaeus first with an invitation to come closer and then with the question that becomes the crux of the encounter: “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks the blind man (10:51). In asking the same question that he has just asked James and John in the previous account (10:36), Jesus again demonstrates his power is not exercised “arbitrarily or impersonally but in the context of genuine involvement.”⁸⁴ His question acts as a catalyst, prompting Bartimaeus to name his desire.

Bartimaeus’ reply is simple and bold: “That I might receive my sight” (10:51b). In naming his request, Bartimaeus simultaneously acknowledges his own need along with faith in Jesus’ authority to grant what he has requested. Like James and John, Bartimaeus’ request reflects his perception of Jesus’ authority. He does not make a

⁸³ Boring, *Mark*, 305.

⁸⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 388.

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menial petition, but rather asserts faith courageous enough to ask for what is humanly impossible. In naming his request, he breaks free from the established social structure that has thus far determined his exclusion from society, and expresses his belief that Jesus is able to bring about the healing needed for his complete restoration and reintegration to community life.

Bartimaeus’ humble request is granted and he receives his sight on the basis of his faith, as evidenced by Jesus’ proclamation: “Go; your faith has healed you” (10:52). The healing of Bartimaeus’ blindness is instantaneous and complete. His healing is subsumed in the greater outcome of the encounter: he follows Jesus on the Way (10:52). He leaves behind his former station in life as a beggar sitting at the side of the road, and joins those who follow Jesus on into Jerusalem.

The Culmination of the Account—Fullness of Restoration

The request made by Bartimaeus culminates in a demonstration of the power of God, not only to heal, but also to bring about fullness of restoration. Beyond physical healing, the restoration of sight for Bartimaeus and his subsequent following of Jesus on the Way has social, economic and even political implications. Bartimaeus—a blind beggar on the margins of society—joins those who follow Jesus.⁸⁵

The desire of the blind man plays a crucial role in this story, in linking human need with the capacity and will of God to fulfill that need.⁸⁶ His request conveys that

⁸⁵ Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 281-282.

⁸⁶ Eric McKimmon, “Mark 10:46-52: Bartimaeus,” *The Expository Times* 123, no. 12 (September 2012), 601.

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although Bartimaeus is physically blind, his spiritual perception is indeed intact. He correctly recognizes Jesus’ power and authority to grant what he has requested: to receive his sight. Bartimaeus’ request ultimately functions as a confession of his faith in the Messiah, the Anointed One, who has the power to restore sight to the blind. Jesus commends this faith and Bartimaeus is restored.

While the disciples have been seeking rank and status, the story of Bartimaeus shows the paradoxical reality of the last becoming first, and of one who has no power becoming the beneficiary of God’s power to heal and to restore. Bartimaeus neither has nor seeks any claim to earthly rank or position, but humbly and honestly admits his need for God to act on his behalf. His posture of humility and faith permeates this account, and becomes an example for the disciples to follow. The life of Bartimaeus is marked by God’s work of restoration that results in a complete reordering of power.

Request and Relinquishment

The expression of desire plays a pivotal role in both of these accounts, and Jesus’ repeated question highlights this theme. These accounts also point to the importance of relinquishing any claim to human power in order for the power of God to be revealed. Both request, as well as relinquishment, emerge as critical tasks of discipleship at this point in the journey to Jerusalem. These tasks do not equate to a “formula” for fulfillment of desire. Rather they are crucial elements of restorative relationship that are ultimately necessary for participation in God’s work of redemption.

Within these accounts, Jesus’ question prompts Bartimaeus and the Sons of Zebedee to make a specific request. He requires them to ask for what they want. This

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means of engagement corresponds with his teaching on prayer in 11:22-25, where he tells his disciples, “whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (v. 24). Jesus clearly instructs his followers on both the importance and potential effect of their requests: “*whatever* you ask for...it will be yours.” Interestingly, this instruction sounds much like the blank check requested by James and John (10:35), or the one issued by Herod in 6:23.

Here in 11:22-25, Jesus presents believing prayer as an effective means of drawing on the power of God to do the impossible. The conditions for such prayer are: “(stated positively) to believe, and (stated negatively) to not doubt.”⁸⁷ These instructions come without explicit mention of any constraint to receiving “whatever you ask for in prayer.” However, a closer look at the context of Jesus’ teaching in this passage offers further insight to the specific terms of these instructions.

The context of this teaching on prayer is located within the same passage that contains Jesus’ most dramatic confrontation of the exploitative practices taking place at the temple mount, under the leadership of the temple elite. In this account, Jesus physically drives out those buying and selling merchandise, and overturns the tables of the moneychangers (11:15-17). He renounces these practices, proclaiming the temple to be a “house of prayer for all nations,” not “a den of robbers” (11:17). The temple, a place of sacred worship, had been turned into a place of commerce resulting in abuse of the poor.

Jesus’ teaching about believing prayer comes immediately after this account of the cleansing of the temple. It is sandwiched between this and another account of Jesus at

⁸⁷ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 449.

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the temple mount at Jerusalem. In between these accounts, the disciples express amazement that a fig tree that Jesus previously cursed has withered (11:12-14, 21). In response, Jesus says, “Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (11:22-24).

According to this teaching, there is great power in the words and requests of those who believe—enough to throw “this mountain” into the sea. Within this context, “this mountain” most likely refers to the temple mount at Jerusalem and the fruitless practices taking place there.⁸⁸ Just as Jesus’ words had resulted in the withering of the fig tree, so the faithful petitions of those who believe have power to overturn earthly structures of rule—that, by their misuse of power—fail to bear fruit.

The temple mount was operating in accordance with the earthly order of rule that results in oppression and exploitation. Jesus’ intent was not to do away with the temple mount as a place of worship, but rather to overturn any obstacle that would stand in the way of people accessing God’s presence. Indeed, there is no “mountain” of earthly power so great that it cannot be overturned by the power of God. The way to access this power is to ask God in prayer.

Those who have faith in God “will be able to tell the mountain,” the temple mount, and thus by implication the authority of the Temple elite “to be cast into the sea.”⁸⁹ Thus, believing prayer can access God’s power to remove any hindrance or

⁸⁸ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 450.

⁸⁹ Van Eck, “Mission, Identity and Ethics in Mark,” 11.

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obstruction that would stand in the way of God’s purpose. Making requests of God in faith is essential in the overturning of earthly structures of rule and the believer’s involvement in God’s reordering of power.

It is not, however, the blank check that it appears to be when read outside of its context in Mark, as indeed not all prayers of faith are answered affirmatively. While believing prayer holds the potential to draw on the power of God to do the impossible, this promise is not without constraint. The power of God to do the impossible must align with the purpose of God in bringing about redemption and restoration.

This is seen clearly in Jesus’ own example of prayer later on in Mark’s gospel. His approach seemingly meets the conditions for effective prayer set forth in 11:23-25; however, Jesus’ request for deliverance is not granted (14:36-42). Jesus’ freedom in approaching God with his honest desire is met by the constraint of God’s plan for restoration. Thus, desire in Mark must be understood as a significant aspect of restorative relationship that is both necessary for, as well as constrained by God’s reordering of power.

Request and Relinquishment in Gethsemane

Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane offers an illustration of the conditions of constraint that are not named within 11:23-25, yet are nevertheless present. Ultimately, Jesus makes two requests of his Father. The first request is an honest plea for deliverance. The second petition qualifies the first, as Jesus asks for God’s will—not his own—to be done. Through this prayer, Jesus models faith in the power of God coupled with full submission to the will of God. His boldness and willingness to ask place him in a posture to

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relinquish his right to any earthly power, allowing the fullness of God’s power to be revealed.

Following Jesus’ confrontation at the temple in Jerusalem, the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders comes to a head, and the chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders begin to look for a way to arrest Jesus (12:12; 14:1). The way is made possible when Judas—one of Jesus’ own disciples—goes to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them (14:10), and Judas looks for an opportune time to hand Jesus over. The time comes after Jesus and his disciples have shared the Passover together (14:12-26), during which Jesus predicts the betrayal that is about to take place (14:18). Following the meal, Jesus and his disciples go to a place called Gethsemane, in order to prepare for what is about to come (14:32).

While prayer has been a regular activity of Jesus’ throughout Mark’s Gospel (1:35; 6:41; 8:6), and something that Jesus has taught (11:23-25; 13:18), the account we are about to examine offers the first instance of the reader being privy to the content of one of Jesus’ prayers.⁹⁰ His approach, along with the content of his request, reveals the intimate nature of his relationship with the Father. Through this account, we see how Jesus’ own watchful prayer places him in a posture to participate fully in God’s plan of restoration that is about to unfold.

As Jesus and his disciples arrive in Gethsemane, he instructs the disciples to, “Sit here while I pray” (14:32). As on other occasions, Peter, James, and John are separated out and are invited to accompany Jesus (5:37; 9:2). As they do, it quickly becomes apparent that the reason for Jesus’ prayer is his deep anguish over what is about to take

⁹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 580.

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place, and he tells his disciples, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (14:34). It is significant that these three disciples in particular, who have explicitly expressed their desire to share in Jesus’ destiny (10:37; 14:29-31), are now in a position to witness the depth of suffering that this destiny entails.⁹¹

Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane is marked by raw anguish. His words reflect “not only the depth of suffering of a human being who shudders on the threshold of torture and death, but also the numinous terror of the eschatological, transcendent nature of what is about to transpire, a sorrow and anguish so intense it already threatens his life.”⁹² The magnitude of this scene not only affirms the reality of Jesus’ human experience, but also points to the extent of the spiritual battle surrounding what is about to take place.

Jesus expresses his anguish to his remaining disciples, and instructs them to stay and keep watch as he goes a little farther and falls to the ground in prayer (14:35). Jesus’ prayer is first recorded indirectly in the narrative: “that if possible the hour might pass from him” (14:35). The ‘hour’ points to the immediacy of what is about to take place, but also connotes an eschatological dimension that Jesus has previously spoken of in the context of trial and tribulation that are to come (13:32). Jesus’ posture in prayer is evidence that his own trial is now at hand.

The intensity and intimacy of Jesus’ approach are conveyed through his words recorded within the account, and he begins his prayer by addressing God as “Abba, Father...” (14:36a). The term ‘Abba’ is Aramaic for ‘Father,’ and conveys the “respectful

⁹¹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 515.

⁹² Boring, *Mark*, 397.

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but familiar...word used in the intimacy of the family.”⁹³ This is the only place in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus uses this particular term, and in fact, it is the only instance of this term within any of the Gospels, giving reason to pause at its use here.⁹⁴

This term conveys both closeness and respect. It is not equivalent to the English word, “daddy,” in that it does not imply a childish relationship, but was used by children and mature persons alike in addressing their fathers.⁹⁵ “Whether Jesus was absolutely unique in this usage remains disputed, but it is clear that this was a distinct, somewhat shockingly unusual address to God, expressing Jesus’ own understanding of his relationship to God.”⁹⁶

He continues with a proclamation of faith saying, “Abba, Father...everything is possible for you” (14:36a). This is something that Jesus has taught others (9:23; 10:27), and now as he approaches God in prayer, he himself professes this belief. In the very midst of the terror that Jesus is currently experiencing, he comes before his Father with certainty, and places his full confidence in God’s power and ability.

From this posture of faith, Jesus proceeds to make his request: “Take this cup from me” (14:36b). This reference to the ‘cup’ recalls Jesus’ previous conversation with James and John (10:38) and Jesus’ foreknowledge of this cup of suffering that he now asks his Father to take from him. It is notable that “Jesus has previously announced his suffering and death with sovereign objectivity (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34); now he quakes

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁹⁴ Black, *Mark*, 293.

⁹⁵ Boring, *Mark*, 399.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

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before its reality, and prays that the cup and the hour might pass him by.”⁹⁷ What is about to take place is not a surprise to Jesus, and yet the reality of the suffering that is now at hand overwhelms him.

His prayer is a succinct and clear appeal for deliverance, prefaced by his proclamation that God is certainly able to grant what he has requested. This approach aligns with his teaching on prayer in 11:23-25, that requests made of God are to be rooted in faith. In this respect, Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane meets the criteria set forth in his own teaching to draw on the power of God to accomplish the impossible in bringing about his deliverance from this hour.

But Jesus’ prayer is not over, and he completes his petition by qualifying the request he has just made. “Yet not what I will, but what you will” (14:36c). Jesus’ request is thereby bookended with “complementary and corresponding assumptions.”⁹⁸ His prayer has been prefaced with his firm belief that everything is possible for God. Now his prayer concludes with clear submission to God’s divine will and purpose.

While the words to Jesus’ prayer are recorded only once within the account, the narrative indicates that Jesus repeated this prayer a second (14:39) and likely a third time (14:41). Each time Jesus moves towards earnest prayer (14:35-36, 39, 41) he returns only to find Peter, James, and John asleep (14:37, 40, 41b). Jesus’ earnestness in prayer stands in stark contrast to his followers’ inability to stay alert and keep watch with him, even “for one hour” (14:37b).

⁹⁷ Ibid., 397-398.

⁹⁸ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 585.

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The Purpose in Jesus’ Prayer

Centered within this triplet, and following Jesus’ second prayer, the narrative offers further insight into the purpose of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane. Here, Jesus urges his disciples to be watchful in prayer: “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (14:38). Jesus’ command is for his disciples to be spiritually alert and active in prayer *so that* they will not fall into temptation.

“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak,” could be understood in different ways. Within Greek culture, such a saying could have reflected a dualistic view of human nature where the spirit is the “higher” aspect and the flesh the “lower” aspect of one’s nature that war against one another.⁹⁹ Thus such a saying would imply that the spiritual aspect of one’s nature must be strengthened in order to overcome one’s fleshly desires.

Within the context of Jesus’ instructions to his followers, however, “it is more likely...that ‘Spirit’ and ‘flesh’ are understood in the biblical and Hebrew sense, in which ‘flesh’ represents human being as such in its totality, with ‘Spirit’ representing God’s power. In this view, the disciple as ‘flesh’ is weak through and through, has no ‘good’ internal ‘part’ that struggles against the flesh, and as a human being relying on human resources is destined to fail.”¹⁰⁰ In this sense, Jesus’ instructions to his disciples points them to the utter unreliability of their own strength and the need for utter dependence upon God’s Spirit in order to resist temptation.

⁹⁹ Boring, *Mark*, 400.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

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Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane offers a picture of what such dependence looks like: showing Jesus as a human being in complete reliance on the power and provision of God in his hour of trial. The repetition of his prayer indicates the depth of his struggle and offers a portrayal of just how difficult it is to relinquish his desire for deliverance from this hour. Yet, it is the very act of prayer that places Jesus in the posture of dependence on God that is needed to act in accordance with his Father’s will and to resist the temptation to act otherwise. His prayer of request and relinquishment are thus not peripheral to the unfolding narrative, but are indeed necessary and central to the accomplishment of Jesus’ mission.

Upon returning to his disciples for the third time, the narrative indicates Jesus’ awareness of the answer to his prayer as he says to his disciples: “Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” (14:41b-42). No audible word from the Father is given (c.f. 1:11; 9:7), and “the only answer Jesus receives to his prayer is the hard answer of events.”¹⁰¹ The ‘hour’ that Jesus prayed would pass from him has come, and the deliverance that he sought so earnestly in prayer is now replaced with his knowledge that he is being delivered into the hands of sinners.

Jesus’ prayer for God’s will to be done is now fulfilled in his willingness to face his destiny, and this passage conveys a similar thought as 10:45: Jesus’ life will be given as a ransom for many. Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane therefore sets in motion the sequence

¹⁰¹ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (England: University Press, 1960), 434.

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of events that will ultimately lead to his death on the cross, and the fulfillment of God’s work of restoration.¹⁰²

Throughout Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, the reader can see how Jesus relates to his Father.¹⁰³ Jesus models both the freedom to make requests as well as the significance (and struggle) of relinquishment of earthly power, as he places himself in full and complete dependence on God. His instructions to his disciples to “watch and pray so you will not fall into temptation” point to the significance of prayer as a safeguard against temptation. His prayer is a powerful act for remaining in alignment with and obedience to the will of God.

Jesus’ own watchful prayer places him in a posture to participate fully in God’s plan of restoration that is about to unfold. The culmination of this account is not the fulfillment of Jesus’ desire for this hour to pass from him. Jesus’ request, made in fullness of faith (11:23-25), is ultimately met by the constraint of God’s plan of restoration, and his request for God to remove the cup of suffering and death is not granted. His belief in the power of God to bring about his deliverance is brought into submission to the purpose of God in his prayer for God’s will—not his own—to be accomplished. The fulfillment of this prayer leads Jesus to the cross, where his relinquishment of any right to earthly power makes way for the power of God to be revealed.

Conclusion

¹⁰² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 522.

¹⁰³ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 580.

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As we have seen through these accounts, bringing requests before God is essential to participating in God’s work of restoration. The accounts of the Sons of Zebedee and Bartimaeus point to the expression of desire as a critical task of the disciple. The request made by the Sons of Zebedee reveals a distorted perception of Jesus’ power and opens the narrative to Jesus’ corrective response. The disciples’ pursuit of earthly power is exposed as counter to the purposes of God and the mission of Jesus.

The consequences of such pursuits are typified by Mark’s portrayal of Herod as a ruler whose desire for earthly power results in his own enslavement to the system over which he seeks to rule. The request of the Sons of Zebedee is critical. It brings the disciples’ desire for earthly power into dialogue with Jesus where it is exposed and confronted by the paradoxical ways of God’s kingdom.

The disciples’ wish for greatness is not denied, but instead is redirected toward effective participation in God’s plan for restoration. In God’s kingdom, greatness is not achieved through amassing earthly power, but rather through relinquishing any claim to such authority. Jesus’ response to the disciples challenges them to subvert earthly systems of power, not through positions of domination and control, but through humility and service. Their initial request for seats of power and preeminence ultimately results in the issuance of a shockingly different call: to become deliberately engaged in God’s reordering of power by becoming slaves of all.

This account highlights the relinquishment of earthly power as a critical task of the disciple. That being said, the story of Bartimaeus that follows quickly reminds the reader that God’s kingdom is by no means void of power. On the contrary, this account

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illustrates the magnitude of God’s authority available to those who ask in bold faith, and in accordance with God’s plan of restoration.

Bartimaeus has the courage to acknowledge his own powerlessness and to approach Jesus with his desire to be healed. His humble request positions him to become the recipient of God’s power to bring about not only physical, but also social restoration through his reintegration into society. He immediately leaves behind his old station as a beggar on the side of the road and joins those who follow Jesus into Jerusalem. Through making his request, Bartimaeus—like the Sons of Zebedee—is brought into greater participation in God’s reordering of power.

Together these accounts highlight the importance of desire in discipleship. Naming desire creates inroads to engaging in relationship with Jesus where involvement in God’s reordering of power is made possible. This participation entails relinquishing any right to earthly authority, and becoming recipients and mediators of God’s power to restore. Asking is not only important, but also ultimately necessary to one’s participation.

Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane exemplifies this as Jesus clearly brings his desire for deliverance to his Father, while at the same time, makes his request for God’s will to be done. Jesus does not receive the deliverance that he asks for, but his latter request is fulfilled in accordance with God’s plan for restoration. Jesus’ prayer models the intimacy and freedom to bring requests before God, along with the willingness to relinquish his desire for deliverance because of his greater desire for God’s will to be accomplished. His prayer is an important act that protects him from temptation and keeps him in alignment with God’s plan of redemption.

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Jesus models the importance of asking, as well as the humility to relinquish any right to human authority. He assumes the nature of a servant and becomes obedient, even to the point of death (Phil. 2:6-8). His obedience leads him to full participation in God’s means of inverting the world’s power structures through the cross. Jesus’ ultimate act of service in his crucifixion becomes the basis of his authority, and the foundation of authority for those who desire to follow him (Mk. 8:34-35; 10:43-45).

This aligns with Jesus’ instructions to his disciples: “Whoever desires to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (8:34b). Thus, the desire to follow Jesus is ultimately inseparable from the way of the cross, and God’s work of restoration that results in the complete reordering of power. Those who desire to follow Jesus must do so in accordance with the way of the cross, in purposeful relinquishment of human authority, and in becoming recipients of God’s power to bring about restoration. Thus all other desires must ultimately be brought into conformity with the way of the cross, where earthly powers are disarmed (Col. 2:15) and the true authority of God is revealed.

Desire in Mark, as seen in Gethsemane, must be brought into the context of restorative relationship with God. In such a context, there is the freedom to approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:15-16), just as Jesus did, and present requests to God as Abba, Father. This confidence is rooted in knowing that if one asks anything according to God’s will, God hears (1 John 5:14). Believers are to pray with the boldness of Bartimaeus, and such believing prayer positions one to receive the power of God to accomplish the humanly impossible (11:23-26). This boldness must also be coupled with knowledge of the constraint made evident in Gethsemane: that even prayers

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of faith may not be answered affirmatively if they are out of alignment with God’s plan of restoration. Thus the believer’s assurance in asking is found only in the cross.

Disciples are called to take up their cross and follow (8:34). They are called, like the Sons of Zebedee, to relinquish any claim to human authority in order to become active agents in bringing about liberation from structures of this world that bind and oppress. They are invited, like Bartimaeus, to become recipients of God’s power to accomplish the impossible through bodily healing and societal restoration. Disciples are called to intimacy of relationship with God as Father where they are free to ask and are invited into full participation in God’s work of restoration.

All together, these examples point to the cross as the place where Jesus must go, and the disciple is invited to follow. The acts of request and relinquishment are shown to be essential tasks of discipleship. Ask in order to be set free from misperceptions and the lure to earthly power. Ask in order to receive. Ask in order to stand against temptation. Ask in order to be among those who relinquish their own rights and follow Jesus to the cross. Ask in order to be persons who rely not on their own strength, status, power or authority, but on the all surpassing power of God to bring about fullness of restoration. Ask, in order that God’s reordering of power may be accomplished in you, and through you, in order to participate fully in Jesus’ mission that will result in the complete reordering of power.

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