

Matthew 20:17-28

What would it be like to have all your **dreams** come **true**? That's what happens in a wonderful little movie called Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. It's all about a very **strange** old man named, **Willie Wonka**, who makes the most wonderful chocolate in the world; and a very **poor** but **loving** little boy named **Charlie**, who became the **heir** to his chocolate factory - along with all its chocolate-making secrets. As if to **warn** Charlie not to let things get out of hand, at the end of the movie Willie Wonka says, "Charlie, **remember** what happened to the man who suddenly had all his dreams come true." Do **you** remember what happened? With a wink of his eye and a smile on his face, Mr. Wonka said, "He lived **happily** ever after!"

But it doesn't **always** work out that way. I'm sure you've heard the **horror** stories about people who literally had their lives **destroyed** after having their **dreams** come **true**, by winning millions of dollars in a **lottery**. As strange as it may seem, sometimes **getting** everything we ever **wanted** can be more of a **curse** than a **blessing**. So, when you're making your requests known to God about things which are uncertain, **Be Careful What You Ask**. Don't get your hopes up too **high**, because you might not **get** it. And at the same time, remember that there are times when things could turn out even **worse** if you **did** get what you asked.

Our text **begins** as Jesus and His disciples are on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. We read, "*As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be **betrayed** to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to **death** and will turn Him over to the Gentiles to be **mocked** and **flogged** and **crucified**. On the third day, He will be **raised to life**.'*" This was the third and **final** announcement which Jesus made to His disciples regarding His impending suffering, death, and resurrection. And as those events drew **nearer**, Jesus' description of them became more and more **detailed**. Jesus wanted His disciples to be well **prepared** for the things which were about to happen.

It was in front of this backdrop that the **mother** of James and John came to Jesus with a **request**. "*Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at Your **right** and the other at Your **left** in Your kingdom.*" She is here called the mother of the sons of Zebedee. At other times she is called **Salome**, or the sister of Jesus' mother, Mary. In reality, it was not **only** Salome who was making this request, but **James** and **John** were involved too. They thought they **understood** what they were asking, but Jesus later tells us that they **didn't** understand. Since they were coming to Jesus

with a request in an **uncertain** matter, they needed to **Be Careful What They Asked**. Even though they recognized Jesus' power to **fulfill** their prayers, they couldn't get their hopes up too high, because there was always the possibility that Jesus **might** say **no**, and **refuse** to grant their request. Perhaps they thought that Salome, Jesus' **aunt**, might help to pave the way for a **positive** response from Jesus.

What James and John **did** understand was that sitting on the right and left side of the **king** was a position of **honor** in the royal court. Sitting on the immediate **right** of the ruler was the spot for the **second** in command, and the person sitting on his immediate **left** was to be **next** in line. While the request of James and John seems to be a very **selfish** and **presumptuous** one, yet it's not **completely** without merit. Let's look at it from the **positive** side. Jesus had just been talking about how important it is to have a **childlike faith** in Him - a faith which trusts Him **completely**. In asking Jesus to give them these important positions in His kingdom, James and John were expressing their **confidence** in the **reality** of that kingdom - even though it didn't **appear** to be much of a kingdom at **all** at that time. The fact that **Salome** is involved in the request on behalf of her sons can be viewed in a positive light as **well**. Out of all the titles and positions which her sons **could** seek in this world, she had encouraged them to **follow Jesus** - to serve **Him** and His **Church** with their lives.

However, it is the **negative** side of their request which jumps out at us in our text. Their request can easily be viewed as being very **arrogant** and **self-serving**. Through their mother, James and John came to Jesus asking Him to grant them a **favor** - and **time** was running out. They knew that Jesus was headed to Jerusalem to **complete** His work - work which would result in great **glory** - and **whatever** that glory involved, they wanted to be **part** of it. Perhaps James and John thought they **deserved** the number 2 and 3 positions in Jesus' kingdom because they made up 2/3 of the "inner circle" of Jesus' disciples. At any rate, it is very clear that they viewed these high positions as ways to **be served**, rather than to **serve**.

It also seems that the other **ten** disciples had made the same **mistake**. Our text continues, "*When the **ten** heard about this, they were **indignant** with the two brothers.*" The "sons of **thunder**" had caused quite a **rumble** among the other disciples. Why? Well, perhaps they were upset because James and John had beaten them to the punch! There were only a **few** of those top spots in Jesus' kingdom, and no doubt **each** of the disciples had been hoping to **receive** one of them. But, James and John were the ones who asked **first**. As a result, the other ten disciples **condemned** their actions. Yet, if Peter and Andrew, or Philip and Nathaniel had gotten to Jesus first, I'm sure they would have made a **similar** request, and would

have presented a noble attempt to **justify** their request - and so would **we**. Isn't it interesting how **easy** it is for us to **condemn** in **others**, the very same things which we **excuse** in **ourselves**!

James and John had not been **careful** in what they asked - and Jesus **seems** to have turned them down. The **fact** of the matter is that Jesus said, "*To sit at My **right** or **left** is not for **Me** to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by My **Father**.*" Perhaps they **had** been prepared for James and John - or for two of the **other** disciples - perhaps they had **not**. But in any case, Jesus quickly pointed out to them that where they **sit** in His kingdom really isn't all that **important**. Greatness in the **world** is measured in terms of **authority**, and the way that authority is **exercised** over others. But greatness in **Jesus'** kingdom is measured in terms of **service** to **others**, not **authority** for **oneself**. Jesus said, "*Whoever wants to become **great** among you must be your **servant**, and whoever wants to be **first** must be your **slave** - just as the Son of Man did not come to **be** served, but to **serve**, and to give His **life** as a ransom for many.*" In their request for positions of **glory**, the disciples had been looking for **luxury** and **ease**. But instead, Jesus was telling them to expect to **serve others**, and to endure **pain**. No **service**, no **glory** - no **pain**, no **gain**.

James and John must have been **extremely** embarrassed. They had stuck their necks out in the hope of receiving positions of **glory** and **authority**, and Jesus told them they were barking up the wrong tree. What could be **worse** than that? Well, in view of the events which took place during **Holy Week**, we could say that it would have been **worse** if Jesus had said **yes** to their request. It was on **Good Friday** that Jesus received **glory** from God the Father, as He **died** on the **cross** to pay the **debt** which we owed for our **sins**. I wonder if James and John and Salome made the **connection**, that on Good Friday, there were two men who were **crucified** with Jesus - one had the position on His **right**, and the other on His **left**!

My dear friends, in one way or another we are all **indebted** to **others** for their strength, and support, and encouragement - whether it's to our parents, our friends, our employers, or someone else. But we are **especially** indebted to our Lord **Jesus** - not only for the things which He **does** for us, but also for the things which He **refuses** to do for us - by **denying** our requests, when we don't **understand** what we are really asking. The Lord knows **best**. He knows **what** we need, and He knows **when** we need it. Let's always **remember** that, especially when things don't **seem** to be going our way. Amen.