

LESS POWER TO YOU  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, Tennessee  
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Mark 10:32-45

It sounds like James and John are waiting for the election.<sup>1</sup> No, not that election—not Corker/Ford or Bredesen/Bryson. We’re all waiting for that election, waiting for it to be over—over with the mudslinging and name calling, over with the commercials on TV that are apparently some sort of contest to see who can dredge up the most dirt on an opponent. We’ll be glad when that election is over.

No, James and John are waiting for another election, the election of Jesus to his position of glory. They’re certain he’s headed that way. His kingdom will come to earth and Jesus will rule. That’s the election they’re waiting for.

And James and John want to be a part of it. Not just a part of it, but right in the middle. Senator John Kerry, of all people, says that this is one of his favorite passages in the Bible, because it reminds him of all those people who want a political appointment: “Can you get my brother-in-law appointed postmaster back home? Can you hire my cousin on your staff? I worked hard for your election—I think I deserve to be your press secretary.”<sup>2</sup>

Something like that is what James and John want. They want to be right at the top—Jesus’ Secretary of State and National Security Advisor. They think that Jesus is coming to power, and they want to be in the inner circle. They think that Jesus’ new age will be just like the old age—people with power on top and people without power on the bottom, and they want to make sure they’re on the top of that power ladder.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications 1997), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> “Kerry belatedly speaks of faith.” *The Christian Century*, October 17, 2006, p. 14.

And why not? Haven't they left everything to follow Jesus? Aren't they a part of the Twelve? In fact, they were part of the inner circle, not just the Twelve, but the Three. When Jesus had gone to heal a little girl who had become ill, he took with him not the whole disciple corps, but just three—Peter, James and John. When he went to the top of the mountain and was transfigured before him, the only disciples with him were the ones in this executive committee—Peter, James and John.

So of course they felt important. I would feel important. “Jesus left those others behind, but he picked me. Jesus needs me in a special way.” So they've earned it, this request to be on the right and the left, this demand to be right at the center of things. Who better than James and John to be the ones who are Jesus' right and left-hand men?

Of course, the timing of their request is not the best. In fact, it could hardly be worse. Let's see, what has Jesus been talking about? Oh, yes, he has been talking about suffering and dying, and not for the first time either, but the third time in the space of a few verses. “The Son of Man will be handed over, and they will mock him and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him.” “Hey, Jesus, we want to be on your right and left in your glory.”

See? They're clueless. Maybe they didn't want to hear what Jesus said. The text said they were amazed and afraid. So maybe while Jesus was talking about this unpleasantness, they put their hands over their ears: “La, la, la—I can't hear you.” And when he had finished, then they made their request: We want to be the big dogs in glory.

Well, I tell you, it's just not appropriate. It's tacky is what it is. Like going to the visitation at the funeral home to sell the widow a hot tub. Tacky—it's just not done. Don't these guys understand what Jesus has been talking about?

Not that the other disciples come off any better. It says that the ten were angry. I'll bet. It's not that they were offended with the inappropriateness of James' and John's request. Rather, they're mad because the sons of Zebedee beat them to it. Hey, I wanted to ask a special favor of Jesus, but those guys got to him first.

Do you detect the heady aroma of power here? This is about control, and being in charge, of making the decisions. We've got people jockeying for control. Next thing you know, Bartholomew is going to accuse Nathaniel of being soft on illegal immigration, and Thaddeus will accuse Levi of not being sufficiently for family values.

Power—who's up and who's down, who's in and who's out. Power, whether it is Augustus Caesar or George Bush, the emperor Tiberius or Donald Trump, Mr. "You're Fired" himself.

What a magnet power is. If people have power, other people want to get near them. Let, say, Phil Bredesen walk into the restaurant where you're eating, and every head will turn in his direction, whether you like his policies or not. He's a power person. Can you autograph my menu? Can I have my picture taken with you? We want power, or, if we can't ourselves be the powerful people, we want to be on the right and on the left, because that makes us more important ourselves.

You know, says Jesus, that in this world there are people who are overlords, people who overpower. Do we ever know it! Politicians, pundits, celebrities—all trying to get the best position. I understand that when a group of senators is going to have a press conference in Washington, and ten or twelve of them are at the podium together, there's this not-too-gentle stepping around and over so that when the cameras start rolling, I'll be sure to be in the picture.

When it comes to putting a religious face on power, we Presbyterians aren't too shabby. Presbyterians have access to powerful people. Out of 100 senators in Washington, the largest affiliation is with the Roman Catholic Church. That is as it should be, since the Catholic population in the U.S. is the largest. The second largest group—15 senators—is the Presbyterians. That is way out of proportion to our percentage in the U.S. population. Our two senators, Bill Frist and Lamar Alexander, both are members of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville.

We know about power. Sometimes we are the victims of others who are overpowering and overlords, but sometimes we Presbyterians are the ones on top, the ones who do the overpowering and overlording.

Jesus looks at all this power and says quite simply: "It shall not be so among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you must become your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

If you think you've heard all this before, you're right. This is the third time that Jesus has made almost exactly this same speech. I guess the reason why he keeps talking about it is that the disciples are so slow in getting it. They're talking about power; he is going toward death. They want to be great; he is following the path to humiliation. He will

model it for them. He submits to Pilate, the powerful politician, and does not call down a legion of angels. He takes his cross upon his own shoulders, and goes to death.

Oh, yes, and do you remember, when he is crucified, it is between two thieves—one on the right and one on the left.

In an ultimate sense, James and John are right—this train is bound for glory. What they don't understand is that before it gets there it will make a stop at the foot of the cross. So Jesus asks them, as he asks us: "Are you able to accept my baptism? Can you drink the cup I drink?" We have been baptized. We have drunk the cup. Are we able?

I'm offended by the demand that James and John made that day: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." It's the demand of power, the demand that puts them as close to the center as I can get.

But it shall not be so among those who follow this Lord. We have been given a different kind of power, the power that turns their question upside down: "Teacher, we want to do for you whatever you ask of us."<sup>3</sup>✠

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, p. 45.