

People want to be the greatest because being the greatest is a lot of fun. It is fun to be the best at a sport. It is fun to be the best at an activity. Jesus's disciples, James and John, wanted to be the greatest. That is what they are driving at when they say to Jesus: "Let us sit in your glory. One of us can be on your left and the other can be on your right." Jesus did not rebuke them. He gently says, "You do not know what you are asking."

James and John didn't know what they were asking because glory in God's kingdom is strange. It doesn't operate by the same rules that make for greatness in this earthly life. The rules for greatness in this life are well known: Work hard, practice, prepare, set goals, and so on. If you follow these rules, and if you have been given the prerequisite genetics and talents, then you too might achieve greatness.

Greatness in God's kingdom operates by the rules that are seen especially in Jesus. Jesus asked James and John: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" The cup that Jesus speaks about is the cup of suffering. On the night when Jesus was betrayed he prayed to his Father three times that he be spared the cup of suffering that was coming upon him. The baptism with which Jesus was about to be baptized was the baptism of blood on the cross. Jesus would be smeared with it, dying like a criminal in disgrace. Greatness in God's kingdom involves suffering and being regarded as the least.

Why are suffering and being regarded as the least the rules, so to speak, for greatness in God's Kingdom? Here, again, we must think about Jesus. Why did he suffer? Why was he regarded as the least?

There are perhaps several reasons for that. I would like to offer three. The first reason why Jesus suffered was because of evil-doers who wanted to continue with their evil-doing. Jesus annoyed them because he would speak against them. They wanted everyone to think that they were fine, upstanding people. Jesus, however, knew the truth and spoke the truth. They weren't fine upstanding people. They were liars, hypocrites, hungry for power, honors, and money. Like whitewashed tombs, they kept themselves looking respectable on the outside but inside they were full of death and uncleanness.

Jesus could have kept his mouth shut. If he would have left them in peace, they would have left him in peace. In fact, things would have gone much differently for Jesus. They would have given him promotions and honors. They would have hailed him as a great preacher with a pastoral heart. But then Jesus would have become a snake just like them. He would no longer be a reliable guide, teaching people how they may attain eternal life.

Which brings us to the second reason why it was necessary for Jesus to suffer and be regarded as the least: He believed. He believed in the power of the Word of God to change people's hearts. He wasn't a cynic. He didn't assume that things are how they are and have to remain the same. If it was impossible for sinners to repent—to change their ways, to turn from evil to righteousness—then there certainly would be no point in the Son of God suffering and dying. If it were impossible for people to change, then people should be left to follow whichever course suits their fancy. The Word of God should die out, and perhaps be replaced by more modern methods of education and inspiration that help people achieve

their earthly goals. But Jesus continued to believe that the Word of God would do what God wanted to achieve when he causes it to be spoken.

The third and final reason I'd like to offer for why Jesus suffered is love. Jesus loves us. He's a lover who goes after his beloved. Jesus pursues us. He says, "Don't stay off on your own, doing your own thing. Be with me. I want to be with you, and I want you to be with me." And the amazing thing, of course, is that we are evil-doers, and yet Jesus wants to be with us. Jesus isn't disgusted by all our disgustingness. He truly loves us, and wants us to be together with him and with God eternally.

This is where Jesus's cross especially comes in. The cross is how we were redeemed and separated from our sin. The cross is how we have died with Christ to sin. Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." The cross makes what should be impossible to be possible. It should be impossible for evildoers to live happily with the holy God. However, we have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. If we have died and it is Christ who lives in us, then it is no longer merely possible to live with God, it's the way it should be! We belong together.

These reasons show how Jesus's suffering and cross are awesome. To be sure, it is a hidden awesomeness. When Jesus drinks the cup and is baptized with blood he looks terrible. He looks poor, weak, and utterly defeated. What is really going on, however, is that he is rewriting the rules.

Among the rules that are rewritten are the rules for greatness. Greatness is otherwise achieved by killing, crushing, lying, stealing, and, in general, using every resource—including human resources—to their fullest. Chew everyone up until you're done with them. Then spit them out and move on to the next one. There is no other way for anyone to accumulate the powers that the greatest of this world have amassed for themselves. They achieve what they achieve by taking advantage of others, and making sure that they are never taken advantage of.

They believe that they are great because everyone tells them they are great. They believe they will always be remembered because they've been in the news. However, how small their victories really are! How fleeting their memories! They achieve nothing that lasts.

Contrast them with what you and I have been given. You and I have the Gospel, the good news that Jesus is king. The Gospel connects sad and helpless sinners to almighty God, making them righteous by the forgiveness of sins. You have been given this Gospel. In that way you are no different than the apostles James and John. James and John believed the good news. You believe the good news too. Because James and John believed the good news, they spoke it to others. You should do that too if you believe it. You don't have to be an apostle or a pastor or a professional church worker to do that. The Gospel is no less effective coming from you than it is coming from me. The Gospel does what it says.

This is an encouragement to evangelize. You've probably heard about evangelism many times over the years. What you don't hear as often is how you are called to suffer and to be regarded as the least while you are doing your evangelism. Here, again, you are like James and John. You have the very same Gospel as they. You have the very same cross. Jesus first asked them if they were able, then he flat out told

them: “You will drink the cup that I drink. You will be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with.” Those words apply to all true preaching of the Gospel. The cross is our banner. It is our battle standard. It is how we can recognize true preaching from false preaching. If we preach what is true, then we will suffer and be regarded as the least just as it was with Jesus, James, and John.

The reasons why we will suffer and be regarded as the least are the same reasons Jesus suffered and was regarded as the least. We have evil-doers today who want to go on doing evil, and they don’t want anyone to say anything about it. They don’t want to be disturbed. God’s Law, which we are to speak just as forcefully as Jesus ever spoke it, disturbs them.

We will suffer and be regarded as the least because we have faith in the working of God’s Word. We won’t give up speaking God’s Word even if the whole world should declare that it is no longer relevant, helpful, or powerful. God’s Word converted us, and so we will speak it.

Finally we will suffer and be regarded as the least because of love. We will pursue our fellow sinner whom we love, even if it makes us look like a fool. We will talk to them even when we don’t know what to say. We’ll get turned down, which hurts. We’ll be regarded as the least—like that poor, ugly, awkward guy whom the girls laugh at.

If our mission and James and John’s mission involves such suffering and humiliation, then why should we ever do it? The answer is glory. We should say, along with James and John: “Jesus, let us be seated with you in your glory.” Jesus’s glory is that good! That’s why James and John wanted it. That’s why we should want it too.

The writer to the Hebrews agrees. He says: “Look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and now he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Don’t be afraid of suffering or humiliation. These powers can look so daunting and intimidating. Jesus is victorious over all things. Whatever suffering or setbacks or hardships we experience are so very temporary. Jesus is forever.