

The request that James and John make of Jesus sounds pretty selfish. “Promise that we will be the ones at your right and at your left when you come into your kingdom;” in other words, promise that we will be the greatest when you finally reign. That’s aiming pretty high. They don’t want to just be a part of his kingdom, and they don’t just want to be among the greatest in his kingdom, they want to sit at his right and at his left, the highest seats of honor in his kingdom. The response of the other ten is no surprise, we are told that they became indignant at James and John, as though the brothers thought that they were better than the rest, that they were greater than the rest, that they deserved the places of honor over the rest.

We might expect Jesus to knock James and John down a peg or two in his response to them. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t say, “Who do you think you are, asking for such a high honor? You should be happy to just *be* in my kingdom, and be grateful for whatever place you have. Don’t want so much for yourself.” Instead, he explains to them how they *can* be the greatest. Instead of telling them not to aim so high, he shows them the way to get what they want: “Be the last of all, and the servant of all, and you will be the greatest of all.”

Why does Jesus do this? It seems like he is encouraging selfishness and pride, by encouraging us to desire to be great in heaven. It might even promote a perverse competition between them, “Try to be holier than your brothers, and you will be

greater than them in heaven.” That seems to set up a system where we rejoice when others fall, because it means we’ve moved up a notch.

But only we fallen human beings could hear the Lord’s words and take them to mean such a thing. It is not selfish to want to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, which is clear when we have a right understanding of what it means to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. It does not mean glory for ourselves. It does not mean authority that we can lord over others. To be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven means to have lived a life that is most closely united to that of Christ’s, and so to have the most intimate, loving relationship with him in heaven. What limit would we want to put on how close we are to the Lord in heaven, on how blessed and happy we are because of our intimate relationship with Him? Who would say, “You know what, you go on ahead of me, you be more in love with Jesus than me, I don’t want to be selfish or prideful, I’ll stay back here?” No, being in love with Jesus is one place where we should always want more, we should never be satisfied with what we have and say, “That’s close enough.”

The greatest example of this is the one whom we know *is* the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Among all creatures, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the greatest, so that we call her the Queen of Heaven. She is so because she lived her life in perfect communion with Jesus, to the point where she never preferred any sin over her love of God. She submitted her life to the will of the Father, she humbly

served her Lord throughout her life, she willingly suffered with him as he walked the way of the cross, and then she adopted the Church as a mother for the rest of her life. It was not selfishness or pride that led Mary to live such a life of holiness, such that she could be the Queen of Heaven; it was out of a desire to be as close to her Son as humanly possible and to love Him with all of her heart that led her to live such a life of loving service.

Still, that idea of a hierarchy in heaven sounds odd. After all, aren't we all equal in the eyes of God? Doesn't He love us all as sons and daughters? He doesn't play favorites, does He? So how can one of us be elevated over the others as Queen of Heaven, how can some be closer to Him than others? That doesn't sound like heaven; that sounds like this fallen world of inequality and injustice.

It is true, we are all equal in the eyes of God, as human beings made in His image and likeness. And He does love us all, He died on the cross for all of us, and would have still died on the cross for you even if you were the only human being in existence. The hierarchy is not because God loves us unequally; the hierarchy is because we love God unequally.

If, *IF*, we make it to heaven, God will fill us with His love, and we will love God with all of our heart. But how much love we can receive, and how much love we can give, depends on how we have loved in this life. How we live now affects our eternity. This life is not just a matter of trying to get a passing grade on the day of

our judgment, and then everyone who is saved hits the reset button and we begin a whole new life in heaven, separate from our life on earth. We are shaping our heaven right now, the Kingdom of God is at hand, if anyone gives even a cup of water to one who is thirsty, he will not lose his reward in heaven.

You sometimes hear of the so-called “deathbed conversion,” when a lifelong sinner, at the very end of his life with the prospect of eternal judgment looming, repents of the life he lived and asks for mercy and forgiveness. You will also sometimes hear of someone complaining that that was too easy, that it hardly seems fair that someone who lived such a life should be saved because they repented at the very end. To this, we say 1) thank God that He is so merciful to us and so eager to forgive and save us, because that bodes well for all us, and 2) as the father explained to the older brother of the prodigal son, “to you who have been with me this whole time, everything I have is yours. Your brother has returned, and we rejoice because he was lost and has been found, but he squandered his share of the inheritance with the life he led. Everything I have is yours.”

Now of course, the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is still in the kingdom of heaven and will be perfectly happy. He will not look at the Virgin Mary and think, “Look at her. So close to the Lord. I wish that was me. I guess I’ll just have to settle with this, and spend eternity regretting that I didn’t love the Lord more when I was on earth.” No, we will all be perfectly happy, and love the

Lord with all our hearts, and be filled with His love. There is no sadness or regret or jealousy in heaven.

Still, which sounds more appealing, to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, or to be the least in the kingdom of heaven? Of course, we want to be the greatest, not in the sense that we want to be better than everyone else, but in the sense of “I want to love God and be loved by God as much as possible.” And that means preparing ourselves now and spending our life making ourselves into such a worthy vessel of God’s love. And so of course we do as Christ directed us and strive to be the last of all and the servant of all here on earth. We look for those opportunities to serve, to love, to die to ourselves for the sake of another. And of course we put the honor and the privilege of receiving our Lord in the Eucharist every Sunday before anything else that would dare try to compete with our Sunday obligation. This most intimate communion with our Lord is a foretaste of that blessedness of heaven for which we long. And of course we accept any persecution and suffering that comes from following our Lord and remaining faithful to the gospel. We do all these things because we love the Lord imperfectly here on earth, and long to love Him as perfectly as we can in heaven.

“Whoever wishes to be great will be the last of all and the servant of all.” There is our map, there are our instructions. May we all strive to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.