

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

*James: Anger and Ambition*

**Luke 9:51-56; Mark 10:35-45**

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Today, we meet the apostle James, son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John. James and John are a pair of brothers who, along with the brothers Peter and Andrew, are always the first four apostles listed. James is nearly always listed before John, indicating that he was probably older. Zebedee seems to have been a successful businessman, running a deep-water fishing company on Lake Galilee. Besides his sons, he had hired hands working for him. Peter and Andrew were some sort of partners in the business. Along with his brother John and Peter and Andrew, James heard the call of Jesus to leave the nets and boats and to “follow me and I will make you fish for people.” James and John left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Jesus (Mark 1:19-20).

After they had followed Jesus for a time, seeing some of his miracles and hearing his teaching, Jesus went on a mountainside and called to him the ones he wanted. They came to him. He appointed twelve of them and designated them apostles (ones who are sent, messengers, authorized representatives). They were to be with him and to be sent by him with authority to preach and drive out demons. These twelve included James and John, whom Jesus nicknamed “Sons of Thunder” (Mk 3:13-17). It’s not clear whether he gave them that nickname when he appointed them or some time later as their personalities became more obvious.

It’s possible that Jesus had known James and John for a long time before calling and appointing them. We know a little bit about James’ family. We know his father was Zebedee and his brother was John. We may know his mother’s name as well. Describing Jesus’ crucifixion, Matthew includes among the women present, “the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (27:56). Mark, in a similar list, mentions a woman named Salome (15:40-41). It seems likely that this is the same woman. So, Zebedee’s wife and the mother of James and John is Salome. The Gospel of John says that one of the women at the cross was the sister of Jesus’ mother Mary (19:25). There’s

no way to be sure, but some see a hint that Salome was Mary's sister and Jesus' aunt. So James and John would be Jesus' cousins. This isn't obvious in the text, but there's the hint of a possibility.

At any rate, Peter, James and John seem to be especially close to Jesus. They are the three disciples Jesus takes with him when he heals Jairus' daughter, is transfigured on the mountain, and agonizes in prayer at Gethsemane. Along with all the other disciples, James follows Jesus, learns from Jesus, shares in Jesus' mission, ministers with Jesus, and stumbles toward becoming like Jesus.

James seems to be another who was less of a talker and more of a doer. Our artist, Kenneth Wyatt, portrays James at the oar of a fishing boat in a stormy sea with an eager smile on his face. He sees James as eager to face anything. He found a model for James in Dickey Sisson, the foreman of a construction crew working on a hospital's new wing. Mr. Sisson was originally from Ohio. His father had been a Methodist pastor. Wyatt saw in him the daring and the look of a "Son of Thunder" (*The Apostles* 15).

Let's go back to that nickname Jesus gave James and John. "Sons of Thunder." What did Jesus see in these brothers that made him call them that? Thunder is loud and raucous; it rattles us. James must have had a stormy personality. He thundered when people got in the way and in trying to get his own way. James speaks to those who have strong personalities and may struggle with strong emotions. James was supercharged with the emotions of anger and ambition. Those are not necessarily sin. Jesus saw them as energies for excellence. When anger and ambition are redeemed by grace, dedicated to God and redirected by God, they can propel discipleship powerfully. It took a while for James to discover that. Let's look at examples of his anger and ambition and see what we can learn about dealing with our own.

Jesus and his disciples are going through Samaria. Samaria was between Galilee and Judea. Jews often went around it to avoid contact with the Samaritans. Jews and Samaritans had a long-standing hate for each other. But occasionally Jesus and the disciples would go through Samaria as they do at this time.

Jesus sends messengers ahead into a Samaritan village to prepare the way for him, to make arrangements. But because he's going to Jerusalem, the people in the village refuse to show hospitality. They will not welcome him. When James and John see that these Samaritans are rejecting Jesus, they ask, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" (Luke 9:51-56). Talk about sons of thunder—and lightning!

James probably already had some smoldering resentment of Samaritans. Then, for this village to deny Jesus (and James!) hospitality was more than he could take. Let's get them! Let's get rid of them! They're in our way—let's roll over them. If they don't want us, we sure don't want them. But Jesus rebuked James and John and led the disciples on to another village.

Eugene Peterson tells about growing up in a small mining town in Montana. His home was loving and Christian. When he started school he discovered what the Gospel of John named "the world"—those people who do not regard God with either reverence or obedience. He discovered this in the person of Garrison Johns, the school bully. Eugene had never seen Garrison up close. He wore a red flannel shirt, summer and winter, and walked with a swagger. He was a year older than Eugene and had a reputation for meanness.

About the third day of first grade, Garrison discovered Eugene and took him on as a special project. Eugene had learned in Sunday school not to fight, so he had never learned to use his fists. He had memorized verses like "Bless those who persecute you" and "Turn the other cheek." Somehow the bully sensed this and picked Eugene. Most afternoons after school he would catch Eugene and beat him up. When Garrison discovered Eugene was a Christian, he taunted him as a "Jesus sissy."

Eugene tried going home by different ways, but Garrison always found him. He got home bruised and humiliated. His mother told him that this had always been the way of Christians in the world and to get used to it. He should pray for Garrison. Those memorized verses began to get tiresome.

Then, in March, something unexpected happened. Eugene was with some neighborhood friends one day when Garrison caught up with them and started in on him. Having an audience helped him show off more.

But something snapped in Eugene. For a moment the Bible verses disappeared from his mind and he grabbed Garrison. To the surprise of both of them, Eugene was stronger. He wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest, and pinned his arms to the ground with his knees. He hit Garrison in the face with his fists—and enjoyed it. Blood spurted from Garrison’s nose. The other children were cheering, urging him on.

I said to Garrison, “Say ‘Uncle.’” He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More blood. More cheering. Now my audience was bringing the best out of *me*. And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, “Say, ‘I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.’” He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More blood. I tried again, “Say ‘I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.’”

And he said it. Garrison Johns was my first Christian convert.

Garrison Johns was my introduction into the world, the “world that was not my home.” He was also my introduction to how effortlessly that same “world” could get into me, making itself perfectly at home under cover of my Christian language and “righteous” emotions. (*The Pastor* 46-48)

That sounds kind of like James, doesn’t it? That’s an obvious misuse of anger, out of control. But what if anger can be controlled and channeled to fight injustice and evil? What if it can be dedicated to God and redeemed, turned into energy that can accomplish something positive?

I grew up thinking that anger is bad, something to fear. I’m still working on unlearning that. Jim Buskirk says it’s good to suppress anger if you’re letting trivial things pass, but it’s bad if suppressing anger keeps you from dealing with real issues. Anger is good to express about crucial things and if it’s done with grace and reason and good conversation. But expressing anger is bad if we lead others just to get angrier and escalate the situation. We may need some help understanding why we are angry. Or

depressed—some say that some depression is anger turned inward. But with that help, maybe we can turn anger into energy for excellence (“James: Sinner or Saint?” 3/4/90 First UMC, Tulsa).

Now what about ambition? We see that in James as well. One day, James and John came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” That’s either real boldness or real presumption! How many of us are that bold in prayer?

Jesus responded graciously, “What do you want me to do for you?”

They said, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” Wow! Their boldness in approaching Jesus is matched by the boldness of their request.

Maybe James heard what Jesus has been saying about his suffering and death as some kind of figures of speech. He seems to be still looking for Jesus to display his power and start ruling Israel. Maybe he heard what Jesus said about future glory and ignored the rest. At any rate, he and John want to assure what their status will be in Jesus’ glorious reign. They have asked for the places of greatest honor next to Jesus. Might as well be ambitious. Might as well go for the highest.

But Jesus says, “You don’t know what you’re asking.” They still didn’t understand the kingdom of God or Jesus or what is required to come into his glory. And without that understanding, their request comes from presumption and not bold faith.

Our prayers and requests need to be set in the context of God’s kingdom, God’s revelation in Jesus, and what the Bible teaches about all that Jesus did. Otherwise, we often don’t know what we’re asking or even how to ask. In college, I once took a summer course in German. We could only speak in German during class time. Most of us were far from fluent, so when the teacher would pause to see if we had questions, we would usually have to say, “*keine frage*” (“no questions”). We didn’t know how to ask.

Jesus wants to teach us to speak his language, the language of God’s kingdom. And he helps James and John and us understand him better. He asks the brothers, “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” Jesus is indicating that going the way God has

set before him involves suffering. And he asks, "Are you able to share this with me?"

And James says, "Sure, why not?" He's eager, ready to take on whatever comes. But he and John don't know what they are promising. The cup was the whole ordeal of suffering and death that Jesus would endure. "Baptism" here refers to the Father's purpose in him and all that's involved in fulfilling it. Jesus lets James and John know that they will share his suffering. And Jesus' own role is not to embrace power or allocate glory, but to serve.

When the other ten apostles hear what James and John have done, they become indignant. But they aren't righteous in their indignation. Though James and John were plotting for status and power, the others are competitive and jealous. All of this stems from their wrong view of status and power and greatness.

So Jesus begins to correct their view. It's not that ambition is always totally wrong. Jesus wants his people to be important and significant, to be influential in a positive way. But ambition needs to be redeemed and dedicated to God so it can be harnessed to get done what God really wants. Jesus shows us what true greatness is.

He turns upside-down the popular notion of status and authority. He calls for a shift in the disciples' thinking as he pulls the rug from under a top-down, control-oriented philosophy of human relations. Jesus says that leadership belongs to those who serve.

In God's kingdom, greatness is measured differently than in the world. The world says, "Use your authority, lord it over people below you, do whatever it takes to advance yourself." But Jesus says, "The truly great ones among you are servants and the first among you is slave of all."

Jesus says that he himself is the example of this: "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" (Mk 10:35-45). Jesus is the slave of all so he can be Lord of all. In his humble path of service and in his sufferings, Jesus provides both a ransom for his followers and an example for us. Disciples surrender ambition to Jesus and let him refine it and redirect it to accomplish the purposes of God's kingdom.

After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, James was with the others when Jesus appeared to them. He was in the boat on Galilee when the risen Lord gave them another miraculous catch of fish. He was in Jerusalem with the 120 when the Holy Spirit came upon them and filled them. But, while Peter and John are fairly prominent in Acts, we don't hear much about James—until chapter 12, where we learn "...that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword" (Acts 12:1-2).

This was around twelve to fourteen years after Jesus' death and resurrection. James finally did drink the cup of suffering with Jesus, becoming the first of the Twelve Apostles to be martyred for the faith. There's a tradition or a legend that says a man named Josias brought the accusation against James that caused his condemnation. But when Josias saw the faith and character of James in his final hours, even in the face of betrayal and death, he was so moved that he declared himself a Christian.

So James and Josias were led away together to be beheaded. On the way, Josias begged James to forgive him. James paused, then said, "Peace be with you," and kissed the man who had betrayed him. They were beheaded at the same time. In his dying, James led another person to the Lord and to a victorious death (Ellsworth Kalas, *The Thirteen Apostles* 32).

Somewhere along the way, James' anger and ambition were transformed and redirected. Instead of storming over those who rejected him and the gospel, he won them to Christ by love. Instead of grasping for status and honor, he surrendered, drank the bitter cup and, in a real sense, sat by Jesus in the kingdom, because Jesus rules from a cross. And James, the first martyr of the Twelve, joined his Lord.

Are there some powerful emotions you struggle with that you want to surrender to the Lord so he can redeem them and redirect them? On the other hand, maybe we need to be charged up and made able to feel and to express "the reckless raging fury that they call the love of God" (Rich Mullins). Whatever the need, let's go with James, leaving all to follow Jesus and becoming more than we ever imagined by his grace.