

1 Kings 19:9 - 18; Psalm 7:1 - 10;
Acts 11:27 - 12:3a; Mark 10:35 - 45

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

A story is told of a woman who went to her pastor for some marriage counseling, and after a few moments of chit-chat, the pastor said he had a few questions he would like to ask her to see if he could pinpoint her problem. He asked her if she would be willing to answer these questions as honestly as possible, and she agreed to do so. He asked her the first question: "Do you have any grounds?" "Oh yes we do," she replied. "We have about ten acres north of town." "That's not what I meant," the pastor said. "What I mean is, do you have a grudge?" "On no," she responded, "but we do have a nice little carport." "No," the pastor said, "what I mean is, does your husband beat you up?" "Beat me up? Oh no, I get up before him almost every single day." Completely exasperated, the pastor said, "Lady, you're not listening to me. Why are you having trouble with your husband?" "Well," she said, "the man just doesn't know how to communicate."

How important communication is. And how frustrating it is when it is lacking, and how very difficult. There was a very interesting article a week and a half ago in the Business section of the *Patriot-News*, entitled "He said, she said". How many of you read this? I had a few at the first service who read it; if you haven't read it go home and get a copy and read it. "Communication styles create gender disparities" is a great article.¹ How important communication is. And how difficult it is. God communicates with his people as clearly and as concisely as can be done. And yet they still don't get it at times. Today we are given the image of the dullness and the insensitivity of our Lord's disciples. Here is a group of people who tried to follow and tried to understand, and yet so often they were found lacking. Just like you and me.

As we celebrate this day commemorating St. James the Elder, we see the disciples who have been with Jesus for some time now are making demands of Him – selfish, self-centered, arrogant demands. They had witnessed his humility following the miracles. And they had heard Jesus teaching the important of being servants – the last being first. They had heard his parables of compassion, of not needing to be the greatest. But they still don't understand.

James, whom we honor today, and his brother John, try to get Jesus to promise them a share in God's glory and power. They want a position greater than the other apostles. And in effect they are trying to reduce Jesus' promise of the coming of the kingdom to the level of a political spoils system. They want a guarantee of moving into the top spot in exchange for their loyal support. They want the best seats in the house. When all is said and done, the promise of "glory" sells well, and we all want a part of it. How they reacted is no different than the way you and I react today. Just listen to some of the popular television preachers promising prosperity and good fortune. People like Robert

Schuller who in his book **Self-Esteem** claims that Jesus Christ is the world's greatest possibility thinker. I don't know what Bible they get their theology from, but it's not the Bible that contains the suffering servant passage of Isaiah 53. Or the laments from the Psalms and the book of Job. Or the grief and heartache from the gospels and the letters of Paul. Their messages don't contain words like "smitten" or "afflicted" or "wounded" or "oppressed". And they don't use words about Jesus' servant-hood or suffering. Jesus did not say to us, "Come follow me and you'll have it made in the world". He spoke of a cross. And He spoke of suffering.

The message of many television evangelists, I believe, is similar to the requests of James and John – "grant us to sit at your right hand and at your left in your glory". And that sounds good to all of us. We too want the best seats in the glory-land. We want the glory that God has offered us, but forget about those challenges, those demands. And while that certainly sounds good to you and to me, it didn't sound good to our Lord at all. "You do not know what you are asking", he says. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

And then he goes on to speak about servant-hood and the need for us to be servants, yes even slaves. God doesn't just ask us to be servants; God also shows us what this means. God illustrates this for us, and we are given examples which we can imitate, and this is by far the best way that God can communicate with us.

Let's begin by looking at our first lesson. Elijah, I think, is also afflicted with the same desire as James and John, he wants to be with God in glory-land, especially as he is trying to escape from Jezebel, who wants his hide. He goes up to the mountaintop. And here I have to pause for a moment to say something about the importance of mountaintops. I'm sure you are all aware of how important they are in the Bible. Moses meets God on the mountaintop and is given the Ten Commandments. Abraham prepares to offer Isaac, his son, as a sacrifice on the mountaintop. Jesus is transfigured on the mountaintop, and crucified on a hill, a small mountain. And he ascends into heaven, returns to the hiddenness of God on a mountaintop. Mountains are pictured as the place where God confronts human beings; they are places of meeting.

And so Elijah goes up the mountain because he wants to be with God, to be with God in glory-land. And when he gets there, God asks him, "Elijah, what are you doing up here?" And Elijah replies, "I want to be with you, God. Besides, it's a mess down there in the valley, and it's not even safe to be there." And so God says to him, in effect, "So you want to be with me Elijah? Well just stand over here; I'm going to be passing by." What happened next were all of the symbols of God – wind, earthquake, fire, and there was probably lightening on the mountaintop – all represented the power and the presence of the glory of God. And as Elijah listened to all of these, he finally got the message that God was not in the wind, and God was not in the earthquake, and God was not in the fire.

Then came that silence, that sheer silence. And he heard God speak to him again, "Elijah, what are you doing up here?" And again Elijah tells God why he's there and God says to him, "Elijah, you haven't got the message yet, have you? You're not going to find me up here. Go back down into the valley, that's where I am. And when you get there, I want you to do this: anoint Hazael as king of Aram, and Jehu as king of Israel; and Elisha as prophet in your place." Elijah finally got the message. God finally got

through to him. "Elijah, if you want glory, if you want to be with me, then go where I am. Go back down into the valley where the action is. Go and be with my people, and serve them as I have served you."

Do we really hear what God says? God not only tells Elijah, but He goes on to show all of us what this means. God does this by sending His son, who came down into the valley to be one with us, to live among us, and to show us how God wants us to live. In the New Testament there is that marvelous scene on the Mount of Transfiguration where our Lord takes Peter and these two apostles we met today and goes up to the mountaintop. And while he is there, Jesus appears different than he was before; he was transfigured before them. And they were so impressed with this moment of glory that they wanted to build three booths there, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. And then comes that voice out of the clouds, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him!" And when they listen to Him, Jesus leads them down to the valley, and goes to Jerusalem, where he is later crucified. "If you want glory," God says, "just look at what I have done." And then He shows us this strange idea of glory. His idea of glory is certainly different than the world's idea of glory. His concept of glory has something to do with a crown of thorns and a cross. It has more to do with shovels and mops than it does with scepters and golden crowns. It has more to do with serving others rather than lording it over them. We have a tendency not to dwell on that picture, don't we? Instead we want to talk about the Lamb of God, or the Shepherd who tends the sheep, and we picture in our minds a peaceful, pastoral scene of Jesus, cradling a lamb in his arms or holding a little child on his knees. Or perhaps we want to see Jesus as the little baby in the manger, rather than looking at the man on the cross. And we pretend that the swaddling cloths are pure white and there's a gold halo around his head, and we pretend that there is nothing smelly or dirty about a stable. And then we tend to pass over the pictures of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, and eating with sinners and even prostitutes. We shy away from the servant Jesus who reaches out to touch lepers, who lifts up filthy beggars. We shudder when Jesus approaches a man possessed by a demon, and when he reaches out to someone who is both deaf and blind. We hesitate to respond to his call to serve, to act with that love with which he has loved us.

Why do we do this? Is it because we have a different idea of what glory is all about? Is it because we think more like James and John, and also Elijah? If so, then we need to listen carefully to God as he tries to communicate with us. God speaks to us about a strange concept of glory. It is not to be found in the power of wind and earthquakes and fires on mountaintops. Rather it is found in the power of love, down in the valley where people are hurting, suffering and dying. And God invites you and me to respond to that kind of a call, to seek that kind of glory. We are called to live lives of service, even lives of suffering. And Jesus is still looking for servants of the kingdom, and not lords of the earth. He says to us: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, to give his life a ransom for many."

May we ask, not for glory, but rather for the heart of a servant. Amen.

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