

Sunday, October 21, 2012: Mark 10:35-45

by [Lee Canipe](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

I've always been a goal-oriented person. I like to run marathons, for example, because they turn my daily training runs into a work in progress. What I do today will get me closer to the finish line several months from now. I enjoy the process because I've done it enough times now to trust that if I invest x amount of work, then I'll end up with y amount of reward, as measured out in shiny finisher's medals, cool race shirts, proudly aching quadriceps and personal satisfaction.

As a pastor, there are precious few places where I can count on that kind of guaranteed, short-term return on my investments. Many nights I wonder if my day's labor has gotten anybody any closer to any finish line that really matters.

It's not hard, then, to imagine myself, in one of my weaker moments, joining James and John as they ask Jesus for favored positions around his throne. Granted, it's a tacky request, but it does have the virtue of being sincere. We pastors all know the unglamorous aspects of the ministry: suffering through a contentious budget meeting, mopping up an overflowed toilet in the children's wing, listening to the latest complaints about last Sunday's hymns or cutting the family beach vacation short because of a funeral. These are the sorts of unpleasantries that tempt well-intentioned servants to ask about seating charts in the kingdom to come. Please tell me, Lord, that *someone* is going to benefit from today's labor—if not the people I'm trying to serve, then let it be me. I don't want this effort to be totally wasted.

Before we throw James and John under the bus for being so crass, let's remember what prompted their request in the first place. In the verses leading up to their exchange with Jesus, they've been listening to him describe what lies ahead in Jerusalem. The Son of Man, says Jesus, will be condemned, mocked, spat upon, flogged and killed. Three days later he'll rise again. James and John have given up a lot to follow Jesus—the comforts of home, stable incomes, family, friends—so it's no surprise that they hear Jesus' grim prediction and start wondering about their own futures. What kind of return can they reasonably expect to get from their investment in Jesus?

Notice that, even with the gloomy forecast, James and John remain confident in the long-run promise of Jesus. Despite its clumsiness, their request is grounded in faith. They assume that Jesus will be glorified. That's not in doubt. Instead, their attention is focused on the hard road between now and then—specifically, what their return will be for investing for others or for themselves in an endeavor that's shaping up to be a short-term loss. Understandably, James and John don't want their efforts to be wasted. If they can't expect immediate gratification from today's labor, can't they at least count on a nice reward for their faithful service at some point in the future? "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

From this perspective, James and John's request may still be selfish, but it also sounds a lot more familiar.

I believe in resurrection. I look forward with hope to the future glory of Jesus. I don't worry about the long run. I do, however, sometimes get discouraged in the short run. I sometimes wonder whether today's labor is part of a glorious work in progress or another bucket of water poured down a hole. I sometimes wish I knew that there was a seat next to Jesus with my name on it: a soft, leather-upholstered confirmation that my efforts to be faithful on this earth will not go unnoticed and unrewarded by the Lord in heaven. I can't very well criticize James and John for asking Jesus for something that I, had I more courage, would ask for myself. I suspect maybe that's why the other disciples got so angry with the two brothers: James and John beat them to the punch. They had the brass to step up and ask for what everyone else secretly wanted for themselves.

Of course, Jesus' response reminds me exactly why I'm not brave enough to make that kind of request. "You do not know what you are asking," he tells the brothers. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Can you, in other words, walk down the dark road of suffering that I must travel? Without missing a beat, James and John answer in the affirmative: "We are able." It's here that I must part company with the sons of Zebedee. Rightly or wrongly, they are confident where I, if I am honest, can only be hopeful. I hope that I would be able to follow you well, Jesus.

We never can tell. Discipleship doesn't lend itself to a tidy $x + y = z$ equation. It's not like training for a marathon. Today's faithful labor may bear fruit that we'll never see this side of heaven. The unpleasantness of servanthood could turn out to be some of the holiest acts we ever perform. When it comes to following Jesus as he wants to be followed, the real work in progress—at least in the short term—may be

less about what we do than it is about who we are becoming. On behalf of James, John and those of us who wonder about such things, I hope that's true.