

Greatness

And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.

Matthew 20:24

The reaction of the other ten disciples to the request by James and John in this account is, unfortunately, not surprising. These two disciples had come with their mother to put in an early request to sit on either side of Jesus in His kingdom. This request may have been prompted by Jesus' answer to Peter's question at the end of chapter 19. After witnessing the dejected departure of the rich young man, who was not willing to exchange his riches for the privilege of following Jesus, and hearing the subsequent teaching on how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, Peter recognized that he and the other disciples had, at least externally, "forsaken all and followed" Jesus. As a result, he asked what the disciples would have in return. Part of Jesus' answer included them sitting on twelve thrones judging Israel, when He would come to sit in His throne of glory in the regeneration. James and John may have been contemplating and discussing this, evidently even with their mother, since that time, and had decided to attempt to reserve their seats. In this account, Jesus told them that they didn't know what they were asking, and they in fact agreed to the resulting "cup" that they also did not understand (vv. 22-23).

Once the remaining ten recognized the transaction, their indignation was kindled. The word for "indignation" here is described as "a strong word for angry resentment." In our current language, it also implies a perception of unfair treatment. Why were the ten indignant? Perhaps because they all were aspiring to the same privilege, but had not the fortitude to make the same request. It was not fair that they had missed the opportunity to ask, as they all perhaps now esteemed themselves above the rich man. They had no inclination to promote the two.

The disciples continue to remind us of the true nature of the human condition. Here were twelve men who had forsaken their way of life to follow one whom they believed to be the Son of God. Yet in the midst of their faithful endeavor, they had been succumbing to sinful visions of greatness for themselves. This sadly also followed another of several admonitions from Jesus predicting His passion, which they continued to misunderstand or dismiss. On this occasion, it is significant that Jesus took another opportunity to remind them that greatness in His kingdom is not measured by dominion, but by service to others, for which He provided the ultimate example (vv. 25-28). Let us be warned by them of our potential human frailty even as faithful followers, and be encouraged by Him to pursue the greatness of humble service.