

Sometimes, we just need to be put in our place.

The story is told of a young, brash, pastor who would go to meetings with fellow ministers, not necessarily to pick fights, but he was not shy about sharing his opinions, and he seemed to be convinced that he was normally right.

It was during one of these “discussions” that our brash young pastor received a reality check. After dominating another conversation, he threw out a question to the group: “What’s the best pastoral advice you’ve ever heard?” An answer came back immediately. “Listen more, talk less.” The message was sent and received. To his credit, the pastor did begin to listen more and lose some of the rougher edges—and came to appreciate being put in his place without too much embarrassment.

In today’s Gospel, James and John are cozying up to their teacher in hopes of making a place for themselves. “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” They evidently felt they had put in the time and effort and had the right to frame the question this way. After all, they had left their dad and the family business to follow Jesus. They had been on this journey from almost the very beginning. We are told that only Andrew and Peter had been with Jesus longer. They were students of the Master. They were servants of the Mighty One that had healed the sick, given sight to the blind, and even raised the dead. They had been sent out on the Lord’s mission and had taught with authority and had even cast out demons. If anyone deserved a special place in the kingdom, James and John would be prime candidates. As a result, they wanted those seats of honor.

How about us? Have you ever compared yourself to others and over-estimated your worth? Maybe you’ve never said it this way, but you’ve felt that God owes you something for your good behavior? Or maybe it’s not pointed at God so much—but because you have done this or that in His Name, then people ought to get on board with your opinion of how things should go?

Jesus’ response to James and John and their request for status is telling. He first highlights the fact that these two have no idea what they are asking. They had no idea what cup or baptism Jesus was talking about. This ignorance combined with ambition is only surpassed by their foolish answer of Yes. It is then that Jesus burst their bubble. “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

Greatness in the kingdom of God is not a matter of merit. Greatness in the kingdom of God is granted by grace. The truth is, you and I have a place in the kingdom. However, it has nothing to do with what you have done. But you and I do have a place. And that place is a place of greatness in the kingdom of God. But it has everything to do with the Lord Jesus. He has done it all for you and me!

You have a place because Jesus took your place. The coronation of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords took place in an actual place. And this place was no palace. This place was a place of death, named after a skull. Jesus is crowned, but not with gold. That Friday, Jesus took His much-needed place on the cross and served us to the point of death. Jesus took His place in fulfilling God's promise to Adam and Eve to crush Satan's head. Jesus took the place that no one, not even James or John, would dream of taking and offered His holy life as a ransom for all people. And because He took that place, you now have a place with Him. The great High Priest Jesus offered the greatest once-for-all sacrifice. The great Lamb of God was sacrificed on the altar of Golgotha. And notice, who was on His left and right? Thieves. Sinners. Those deserving death. There, enthroned between the dead and dying, Jesus pays the ransom price for YOUR sin.

This ransom buys you a place in eternity. You can't earn it. You can never deserve it. It is simply given to you out of the mercy and grace and love of God. You received it when you were placed under the New Covenant of the forgiveness of sins in Holy Baptism. You drink freely of this grace when you are welcomed at His supper table. This is your place. This is a place of eternal honor.

Our brash young pastor needed to be put in his place by an older and wiser brother, for his own good. To be candid, that wisdom is good for us to hear, as well. Listen more. Talk less. So, listen to this! You have been put in your place, but not merely in the sense that you have been corrected; this placement is an act of goodness...of love and life. Jesus has placed you as His brother or sister. Your place in eternity is secure and sure. It is not dependent on you or your effort. No, your place is secure because of Christ and His Cross, therefore you can serve others without fear. No fear of "how does this make me look." No fear of "have I done enough?"

Today you have been put in your place by grace. Thanks be to God!