

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR!

Today's Text: Matt. 20: 20- 34

Extracts:

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask... To sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father" [Matt. 20: 20-23]

Anais Cruz is a 42-year-old medical doctor who practises in Cuba¹ Her lifetime heart's desire was to give her son, Juan Carlos Rivera, the opportunity to school and live in a free and democratic society, which Cuba is not. So, last year, she sent him to Miami, Florida, to live with his grandmother. But, on Tuesday, 15 September 2009, Juan Carlos was fatally stabbed, allegedly by a classmate, on the grounds of Coral Gables High School. He was only 17 years old. As the sad news was broken to his mother in Cuba, she broke down and cried, saying, "My God, how could you have done this to me?" She is now coming to Miami for her son's funeral, not his graduation.

Any parent could have been in her place. Each day, we make decisions concerning our children's future. Individuals also make such decisions with respect to their education, marriage, career and other pursuits. But how many of us really know what they are asking for when they make such decisions? If the Cuban mother had known that she was sending her precious son to an early death in America, would she have worked for him to come to Florida, no matter her personal values about life and freedom? Examine your backyard of broken promises and failed initiatives. What did you do wrong? What could you have done differently?

In this week's study, a mother asked Jesus for a special privilege for her two sons, and two blind men asked for healing for themselves. One was denied and the other was granted? Why? Let us find out.

¹ Based on Sharon Lawson and Brian Hamacher, "Heartbroken' Mother to Make Trip from Cuba to bury Son," NBC Miami, Fri. Sept. 18, 2009, <http://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local-beat/Heartbroken-Mother-Making-Trip-From-Cuba-to-Bury-Son-59731937.html>

1. Background: Does ambition wear a cap?

The *Encarta Dictionary* defines ambition as “a strong feeling of wanting to be successful in life and to achieve great things.” I am yet to come across anybody who does not want to be somebody. We go to school because we believe that it is the road to education, better jobs and better pay. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with being ambitious. The challenge lies in knowing what to pursue and how to do it.

In this week’s Bible story, we come across Mrs. Zebedee, the mother of James and John, two of the twelve apostles of Jesus [**Matt. 10: 2**]. She had an ambition for her sons in Christ’s kingdom. In the story, there were also two blind men who had the desire to see again and they came to Jesus for that purpose. Let us see how both ambitions played out, using the following sequence:

a) *The trigger*

Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem as He was winding up His earthly ministry. On the road, He drew aside His twelve disciples and said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles, to mock, and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again” [**Matt. 20: 17-19**].

At the time, His disciples did not understand when and how the kingdom would be restored to Israel. Even on the day of Christ’s ascension into heaven, they asked Him, “Lord, will You *at this time* restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” [**Acts 1: 6-7**]. Therefore, revelation of the kingdom was in their future.

At the time of our story, Jesus and His disciples were on the way to His crucifixion and death in Jerusalem. For them, His resurrection suggested the immediate restoration of the kingdom to Israel. That was a trigger to start jostling for power and positions in the coming kingdom! After all, did Jesus not already promise that those who had given up their earthly treasures to follow Him would receive a hundredfold on earth and inherit eternal life after death [**Matt. 19: 27-29**]?

Mrs. Zebedee was a proud mother. Out of just twelve places, her sons had been given two. Can you imagine that? None of the Lord’s half-brothers, the sons of Mary for Joseph [**Matt. 13: 55**], was among the twelve. Mrs. Zebedee would be the toast of her village! She would become a consultant and adviser to other village folks on how to get close to Jesus. If she was also on the way to Jerusalem in Christ’s entourage, it suggests that she had also left the family fishing business for her husband and their employees

by the Sea of Galilee [**Mk 1: 20**]. Now that the kingdom was about to be restored, it was time to put her ambition to work. She was going to ask Jesus for certain privileges in that kingdom for her two sons [**Matt. 20: 20**].

In the case of the two blind men, “sitting by the road” appeared to be a routine with them [**v. 30**]. They had not only lost their sight; they had lost the hope of ever seeing again. So, they had taken to a life of sitting by the road and begging for alms. At any rate, they had heard of a man called Jesus whose fame had gone “throughout all Syria” to whom the people brought “all sick people” that He healed and for which sake “great multitudes followed Him, from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan” [**Matt. 4: 24-25**]. It was that same Jesus that the two blind men heard was passing by, given away by the “great multitude [that] followed Him” [**Matt. 20: 30**]. That was the trigger they needed to nurse the desire to be healed.

b) *The request*

Mrs. Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, James and John. She knelt down and “asked something from Him” [**v. 20**]. In Mark’s Gospel, it was the two disciples themselves who were said to come to Jesus to make the request [**Mk 10: 35**]. There is no contradiction. What Matthew’s version has revealed is that their mother was behind her sons’ bold request! After all, where did Jacob get the sense to impersonate his twin-brother, Esau, if not from their mother, Rebekah [**Gen. 27: 6-14**]? How did the guests at the wedding in Cana of Galilee know that Jesus could perform miracles if not His mother, Mary, who had thrown hints around [**Jn 2: 1-5**]? So, Mrs. Zebedee was not innocent in the matter!

Jesus asked her, “What do you wish?” She asked Him to grant that her two sons might sit “one on (His) right hand and the other on the left of (His) kingdom.” Jesus was apparently shocked by her request and He told her, “You do not know what you ask” [**Matt. 20: 21-22**]. Compare that with His response to the two blind men. They had heard that Jesus was passing by. They cried out, saying, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!” As the multitude hushed them to keep quiet, they cried out all the more, saying the exact same words. We are told “Jesus stood still.” They had got His attention. He called them and asked, “What do you want Me to do for you?” They replied, “Lord, that our eyes may be opened” [**vv. 30-32**].

To Mrs. Zebedee, Jesus asked, “What do you *wish*?” but to the two blind men, He asked, “What do you *want* Me to do for you?” God does not see as humans do “for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” [**1 Sam. 16: 7**]. So, before we can appreciate our Lord’s

response to the two requests, let us develop some general principles on knowing what we should ask for.

2. Need to curb your enthusiasm!

I have often heard motivational speakers encourage people not to be limited by their circumstances but to “go for it.” They tell them, “Make the sky your limit!” However, for me, the sky is a low limit. Rather, they should say to them, “Make heaven your limit!” Is heaven not higher than the sky? It is. Perhaps, that is why they do not talk about it but we will!

In determining what is right to ask for, you must ask yourself two inter-related questions: (1) Do I know what I am asking for? (2) Do I need it? The following are possible answers that you can consider:

a) *It is God’s revealed will*

Sometimes, the ambition you find yourself pursuing may not be what you would have wanted for yourself if God had not revealed that that was what He wanted you to do for Him. For example, the prophet Amos said, “I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet, but *I was a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel’*” [**Amos 7: 14-15**]. David had no ambition to become the king of Israel until God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint him one even while still as a teenager [**1 Sam. 16: 12-14**]. When Paul came to Corinth, the Jews were hostile to him and he determined to go from then on to the Gentiles. But in a vision that night, the Lord told him, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.” Paul’s immediate plans changed and he remained in that place for a year and six months [**Acts 18: 1-11**]!

Once God has revealed *to you* what to do or to expect, you are in His will as long as you operate within His set boundaries. Unfortunately, many believers walk by presumption, not by faith! A pastor who trespasses and builds a church on another person’s land cannot rely on God’s promise to Joshua that everywhere the sole of his foot touched would be his! Did God send that pastor to go and steal? So, asking God not to allow him to be ejected from that land would be a waste of time.

b) *It was serendipitous!*

Sometimes, you are looking for one thing and accidentally stumble on something bigger or more valuable. That phenomenon is called serendipity. For example, when Samuel became old and his two sons, Joel and Abijah, had been rejected on account of their corrupt practices, the

people of Israel cried to Samuel to make them a king to be judge over them after him. Samuel prayed to God and He answered Samuel, “Heed their voice and make them a king” [1 Sam. 8: 1-22]. The Lord told Samuel that He would send a man the following day about that same time. He was the one He had chosen as the new king. At that time, Saul, the son of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin, was looking for his father’s donkeys that had been lost. After searching in vain, his servants suggested that they should go to a seer nearby, the prophet Samuel. As soon as Samuel saw him, God confirmed to him that Saul was the man to be made king. So, Saul who was looking for lost donkeys found a kingdom instead! He was anointed the first king of Israel [1 Sam. 9: 1-27].

You may find yourself obtaining favours that you did not ask for or deserve. Doors may be opening that you did not knock on. For example, Jeroboam, the runaway servant of Solomon was made king of the bigger Northern Kingdom of Israel, not out of his effort but because God wanted to use him to punish the house of Solomon for his unfaithfulness in the evening of his reign [1 Kgs 11: 11, 31-35]. Alternatively, you may find yourself being persecuted or unjustifiably denied due benefits or privileges only to one day find yourself pushed into a much higher position or limelight. For example, Joseph went from slavery to prison from where he was elevated to the position of governor of Egypt. In both cases, it is not your luck (good or bad) at work. God is bringing you to a place where you will glorify Him. You did not ask for it but you got it!

c) *Or you may just be hustling!*

You may or may not know what you want but you want it all! You may not know whether it may glorify God but you may presume so or do not care. You have a compelling urge to do it because everybody is doing it or you want to get ahead of competition. After all, the end justifies the means, as the popular saying goes.

If you find yourself in such situations, you are a hustler. You are motivated largely by lust or greed. According to the psalmist, God has set such people on “slippery slope” whose end is “destruction” [Ps. 73: 18]. For example, Adonijah wanted very badly to succeed David as king of Israel but Solomon was anointed in his place as already revealed by God. Then Adonijah went ahead to ask for king Solomon’s permission for him to marry Abishag, the young Shunammite woman that was David’s wife at old age. Did Adonijah not know that that was a treasonable act? Solomon’s answer suggests it when he replied his mother, Bathsheba, through whom the request had been made, “Why do you ask Abishag the Shunammite for Adonijah? Ask for him the kingdom also.” Adonijah was executed immediately [1 Kgs 2: 12-25].

From the forgoing, we can appreciate the responses that Mrs. Zebedee and the two blind men received. Jesus had compassion for the two blind men. He touched their eyes. They immediately received their sight back and they followed Him [Matt. 20: 34]. Their healing was part of the Lord's ministry and it glorified God. The other one was more complicated. Jesus asked if she would be able to drink the cup that He was about to drink and be baptized with the baptism that He had been baptized with. She said she could. Mrs. Zebedee was hustling! She was ready to say or do whatever it would take to get her wish. However, Jesus told her that the two seats on His right and left were not His to give but that they were meant for whom His Father had prepared them [vv. 22-23]. The other disciples were furious when they heard what had happened but Jesus assured them that whoever aspired to be great should be ready to serve [vv. 24-28].

3. Conclusion: Stop asking amiss!

James became the first apostle to be martyred during the reign of Herod the king [Acts 12: 1-2] and John was the Lord's beloved disciple that lived the longest and through whom the book of Revelation came to us. That was God's plan for their selection as disciples of Jesus. But their mother's wish never came to pass. If the risen Christ is now seated at the right hand of His Father in heaven [Acts 7: 55; Eph. 1: 20; Col. 3: 1], His Father must be on His left while the Holy Spirit is on His right! There is only one throne and it is for the triune God. That is why Jesus told Mrs. Zebedee that she did not know what she was asking for.

You can ask and be answered. But you can also ask and not receive "because you ask amiss that you may spend it on your pleasures" [Jam. 4: 3]. Therefore, be careful what you ask for!

For more on the subject, read:

"Your Ambition is not necessarily God's Purpose"

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http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_6/PDFs/19_YourAmbitionisnotGodspurpose.pdf