

## Careful What You Wish For

Job 38:1-7; Mark 10:35-45

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Have any of you read the short story by the British writer W. W. Jacobs titled “The Monkey’s Paw”? I know it sounds strange, and it is a bit strange. It is set in England long ago. On a cold, stormy night, an old friend came to visit the White family—father, mother, and adult son. The visitor, Sergeant-Major Morris, was a soldier for twenty-one years, and during those years he traveled the world seeing exotic places and things. On the evening of his visit, he possessed a most exotic item: a mummified monkey’s paw. He told the family that an ancient holy man in India had blessed it, and it had power to grant three wishes to three different people. Sergeant-Major Morris admitted that he had gotten his three wishes, as had the man from whom he got it. But then his face suddenly grew somber, and he threw the monkey’s paw into the fire, saying that it was dangerous and should be destroyed.

Mr. White quickly reached into the fire and rescued the monkey’s paw. Why, it had three more wishes. He couldn’t let it be destroyed. The soldier cautioned him again saying that it was dangerous and would bring only misery to the one who possessed it. He strongly advised that it be destroyed.

The man and his wife pondered the dilemma. Should they heed their friend’s advice and destroy the monkey’s paw, or should they take a risk and make a wish? Thinking they were being clever, they decided to make a modest wish and see what happened. So they wished for 200 pounds. It was not a great amount of money; mostly it was a test. The next day they noticed a nicely dressed man pacing outside their home. He seemed nervous, as if he was trying to decide whether or not to approach their home. Finally the man stepped onto their porch and knocked on the door. He was a representative from the factory where their son worked. He bore the sad news that their son had been tragically killed in an accident at the factory. His body was mangled in one of the factory machines. The company was admitting no fault, of course, but as a gesture of sympathy the company wanted to present them with a gift: 200 pounds.

The couple was devastated and realized the wisdom of their soldier friend. The monkey's paw indeed was dangerous and should be destroyed, but they just couldn't do it. It had two wishes left.

About a week later the grief stricken mother had an idea. They could use the second wish to wish their son back. The first one worked, in a way, so maybe the second wish would work even better. The idea troubled Mr. White greatly, but he finally relented. He wished to have their son back, and suddenly there was a knock at the door.

It must be their son, they thought. It worked! So the mother rushed to the door and began unlocking it. Mr. White then became afraid. He remembered that his son's body was mangled in the accident. He had been dead for over a week. What if a mangled corpse awaited his wife on the other side of the door? She wouldn't be able to bear it, he feared. Just as she unlocked the last bolt on the door, Mr. White used the third and final wish: that their son would not be there. She swung the door open and no one was there.

They got what they wished for, all three times. (W.W. Jacobs, 1902)

The moral of the story is that we should be careful what we wish for. That's true for the Sons of Thunder, James and John, too. In a great text from Mark's gospel, James and John approached Jesus one day and made a selfish, manipulative request. In Matthew's account of this same story, their mother made the request on their behalf. Listen to it; it sounds to me like a demand:

*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you....  
Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in  
your glory.*

Let me set the stage for this conversation. Mark says that this request came when Jesus and the twelve apostles were going up to Jerusalem. Jesus had already told them twice why they were going to Jerusalem and what would happen when they got there. Here he told them the third time that in Jerusalem things would become very difficult. He would be handed over to the authorities, he reminded them, condemned to death, and then killed. On the third day, however, he told them that he would rise again.

So on the way to Jerusalem James and John made this request to sit in the seats of honor beside Jesus. Three times he had told them why they were going to Jerusalem, and yet James and John still didn't understand. They couldn't grasp the real nature of the Kingdom of God. They still didn't "get it" and made a selfish, manipulative request.

I find it interesting that Jesus didn't scold them. No, he simply told them that they didn't really understand what they were asking, that they might not be able to "drink the cup" that he would be required to drink in Jerusalem or "be baptized with the baptism" that he would receive there. Jesus was warning that they didn't know what they were asking for. But James and John naively assured Jesus that they were ready.

When the other ten apostles learned what James and John had done, they were indignant. James and John were asking for the seats of honor at the expense of the other apostles, going behind their backs and pressuring Jesus. This was not good team building. They wanted the seats of honor, the authority, the prestige and the power in Jesus' new kingdom. They clearly were not concerned about the other apostles, and they clearly did not understand the way of Jesus.

So Jesus made this a teachable moment. In response to their selfish request, Jesus gave the twelve, and us, one of the great teachings of the Kingdom of God. Let me say this in defense of James and John, who didn't "get it." I'm not so sure we've "gotten it" either.

Jesus first reminded them of how some people viewed greatness. Greatness for them was about wielding power, having prestige and authority, the ability to lord oneself over others. Then Jesus said this,

*But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (diakonos), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (doulos) of all.*

James and John were not careful about what they wished for. In their selfishness, they were imitating the Gentiles rather than Jesus. So Jesus explained that greatness in the Kingdom of God is about service to others. It is about choosing to become a slave—not being forced—choosing to be a slave to love and care for others. Then he reminded them once again of why

he was going to Jerusalem, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Do you “get” what Jesus is saying here? He turns everything upside down. The Christian way has a different standard for greatness than the one we see in the world. Christian discipleship is not defined by the authority we lord over others: “I can make you do this! I can send you here or there!” That may make someone “great” in some circles, but not in the Christian faith. The truly great disciples of Jesus are servants of others, aware of and responding to needs. Greatness is measured in terms of love, sacrifice and generosity to people around us. And as I studied this text this week I found myself wondering why? Why did Jesus consider service to be the route to true greatness? And then I realized that Jesus demonstrated that service has even greater power than what we see in the world. Service has the power to transform the heart. He demonstrated it. He came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life to transform the hearts of many.

What would you wish for? If you had three wishes, what would they be? You might try to be clever and ask on every third wish that you would have three more wishes. That way they never run out. If you could, what would you wish for? The message of this text is that we must be careful what we wish for because, like James and John, we might wish for something that puts us at odds with who we claim to be as Christian men and women. The real question confronting us in this text is this: Who does Jesus wish us to be? Here he tells us that he wishes us to be servants and slaves and thereby tap into a power than can save people and ultimately save our world.

### Closing Prayer

We hear you, Lord. We “get it,” that you call us to a way of life that runs counter to the world. Help us to be faithful disciples. Amen.