

In Mark 10:35-45, James and John approach Jesus with what seems like a bold and ambitious request: “**Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.**” It’s like they’re asking for front-row seats at the heavenly VIP section, without fully grasping the implications of what they’re asking for. Jesus’ response is as wise as it is disarming: “*You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*”

In other words, “Are you really ready for what this entails?”

The Baptism of Suffering

Jesus isn’t just talking about a pleasant religious ceremony when He mentions baptism here. He’s talking about His impending suffering and death—what the Church Fathers like St. Cyril of Alexandria and St. John Chrysostom refer to as the “**baptism of His passion.**” This is not a sprinkle of water; this is full immersion into suffering for the sake of others. The cup that Jesus speaks of is the cup of suffering He will drink at the Cross.

St. Cyril reflects on this moment, noting that the disciples, like many of us, were still attached to **earthly ideas of glory**. They didn’t yet understand that *Jesus’ path to glory went through the Cross*, and their path to greatness would also require **humility, service, and a willingness to suffer**. In essence, the Baptism Jesus speaks of is not a **call to a throne but to a towel and a basin**, like He shows when He washes their feet.

Blind Ambition: The Human Trap

James and John’s request reveals a universal human problem: **blind ambition**. They see the glittering end result—**glory, power, recognition**—but are blind to the reality that true greatness in the Kingdom of God is found in sacrifice and service. The Fathers of the Church were very aware of this tendency in humanity. St. Augustine, for instance, often spoke of the problem of “disordered loves.” We love glory more than we love God, power more than service, and recognition more than humility.

Ambition is not bad—it’s what drives people to build, create, and achieve. But when ambition becomes **self-serving and disconnected from God’s purpose**, it leads to a dangerous and often destructive path. It’s like climbing a ladder of success, only to realize at the top that it’s leaning against the wrong wall.

The Dangers of Blind Ambition

So, what’s wrong with wanting the front-row seat in Heaven? The danger lies in thinking that getting there is about self-promotion rather than self-giving. When our ambition is purely about ourselves, we miss the essence of the Gospel. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. The Church Fathers, especially St. Gregory the Great, often reminded the faithful that the more you are raised up in leadership or status, the more you are called to humble service. To climb higher is to stoop lower in the Kingdom of God.

Blind ambition leads us to compete with others, to think we must “win” at life rather than cooperate and uplift. It often makes us miss the people we’re meant to serve because we’re too focused on

ourselves. Like James and John, we become so obsessed with our seats of honor that we forget about the cross.

Overcoming Blind Ambition: Jesus' Remedy

Jesus offers a radical cure for blind ambition: humility and service. He turns the world upside down by saying that **the greatest must be the servant of all**. St. Chrysostom emphasizes that this service isn't just a grudging duty; it is a path to true greatness in God's eyes. The ladder to greatness is a paradox: you go up by going down.

Humorously, this is like trying to win a race by running backward. You'd expect to trip and fall, but in the Kingdom of God, running backward—toward humility, away from self-promotion—is how you cross the finish line first. Jesus' life is the model: He doesn't just preach service; He lives it. His "baptism" is His suffering, and He invites us to share in it—not in a gloomy, "woe is me" way, but as a joyful, paradoxical path to glory.

Practical Takeaway: Flip Your Ambition

So, how do we overcome blind ambition in our own lives? The Church Fathers would suggest we "flip" our ambition. Instead of asking, "How can I get ahead?" we ask, "How can I serve?" Instead of wondering how to get to the top, we look for ways to lift others up.

Imagine if the next time you applied for a promotion, instead of listing all your accomplishments, you submitted a resume of all the people you've helped, all the times you've stayed late to lend a hand, and all the ways you've quietly served without recognition. In God's Kingdom, that would land you the top job!

Jesus challenges us to redefine greatness. The cup He drank and the baptism He underwent was about pouring out His life for others. If we're willing to share in that—whether in small daily sacrifices or larger acts of service—we can find true fulfillment and even glory, not by climbing over others, but by lifting them up.

So, in the end, the ladder to greatness doesn't go up. It goes down—to our knees, in service.