

I Courtesy of Fr Desaino

Because we are a democracy, we also think we are a meritocracy, that is, everyone has an equal opportunity to advance in life based on the work that she or he is willing to do. So when things don't seem to work that way, we get unsettled and angry. Why did that particular person get a promotion at work? How come they didn't pick me for their team? I got an A+ so I should be first. And, of course, one of the main battlegrounds on which carry out this fight is in college admissions, affirmative action, allowing someone with somewhat lower grades to be admitted in place of someone else.

When we think about it, however, there are many factors that make meritocracy hard to pull off. One is simply the fact that people know other people and take that into consideration. "My next door neighbor has been out of work and is looking for a job. Can you help her out?" Or just look at the way many relatives of politicians end up with government jobs—even for politicians that scream the most about equal opportunity? Daughters and in-laws, sons and friends. Tell me this isn't the same nepotism that plagued much of history!

So when Zebedee's sons, James and John, ask Jesus for a favor so they can get ahead, the other apostles are furious. I suspect some of their anger is that they didn't ask for the favor first. They keep asking among themselves who is the greatest, who is number one, who is the most favored. Are they going to get ahead on their merits or is Jesus going to do them special favors?

The answer to this is not easy for the disciples to learn, and it's not easy for most Christians to learn. Most of us think we are going to be saved because we work at it, because we earn it. Jesus is telling his disciples, like he is telling us, that everything we have comes as a gift—and the greatest gift we can receive is to share in the death and resurrection of Jesus, that is, to receive the same grace that he received.

You will drink of the same cup that I drink from, says Jesus. You will undergo the same baptism that I undergo. Because the sacraments that Jesus lets us share make us one with his death and resurrection, make us one with the grace that he earned by his perfect listening to his Father. If we have merits, that is because Jesus gives us the merits of his grace.

But these are not merits Jesus received because he put himself ahead of other people. The fundamental stance of Jesus is to be a servant, not to hold power over people but to give himself in generous self-sacrifice for the sake of others. That is the greatest grace we can receive, to be servants who give ourselves for the needs of others. At the heart of Jesus' Kingdom we don't find meritocracy; rather, we find the abundance of divine love and life that flows from giving ourselves to others in service.

The competition Jesus wants among his disciples isn't who is going to be number one, or who is going to get ahead. The competition Jesus wants is this: who will follow him as he takes on our weakness in order to show that it is not our strength that counts; rather, it's the strength of God's love which is the only power on which Jesus relies.

The only way to get ahead in Jesus' Kingdom is to walk behind him in humble service

II

What would you say are the best employee perks in your workplace? Some places offer “casual Fridays,” where the dress code is less formal. For most workplaces, that’s as cutting-edge as they get when it comes to employee perks. But other business owners go out of their way to offer unique benefits to attract and retain employees.

Patagonia, the outdoor equipment company, encourages their employees to get outside on their lunch break and go surfing. They even offer a companywide weather report each day focusing on surfing conditions in their local area. Of course it helps that Patagonia is located in Ventura, California. But I thought that was interesting.

Scripps Health, a California Health Care System, offers pet insurance for their employees’ pets. Forget about wildfires, earthquakes, etc. Move to California and you can get health insurance for your pet! Another company, S.C. Johnson, offers their employees a concierge service that takes care of daily tasks for them, like picking up dry cleaning or taking packages to the post office, so the employees can relax when they get home from work. Google offers its employees free food, massages, ping pong and video games in the office, and the right to bring their pets to work every day.

But one of the most interesting employee perks I’ve heard of is offered by a law firm, Freeborn and Peters. Among their many employee perks is a yearly “luggage party.” On a certain day, they encourage all their employees to show up to the office with a packed suitcase. Then they draw a few names randomly and send those lucky winners on an “all-expenses paid holiday to Las Vegas . . . right there and then.” (1)

In our Bible passage for today, two of Jesus’ closest disciples, James and John, ask him for a favor. They ask him to allow them to sit on his right and left hand in glory. They want the best seats in the house—places of honor and prestige. But they wanted to be appointed to these choice places not because they had earned them or deserved them, but because they had influence with the Boss’ Son. They wanted some special “employee perks” for following Jesus. Does that sound familiar?

Jesus said to James and John, “You don’t know what you are asking. Are you able to drink from the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

In other words, he was asking, “Are you willing to do whatever is necessary to see my kingdom established?”

To their credit James and John answered, “We are able.”

And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink, you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right or left hand is not mine to grant . . .”

What does it take to drink from Jesus’ cup? What does it mean to be baptized with Jesus’ baptism?

Actually, the process is quite simple. **First of all, drinking from Jesus' cup and being baptized with Jesus' baptism means you are willing to pay a price no one else will pay.**

Liz Ryan is the former Senior VP of Human Resources for a Fortune 500 company. Out of her extensive business background, she wrote an article titled, "Ten Signs You're Not Ready for a Leadership Job." She wrote that a person shouldn't try for a leadership role if they were just doing it for the money, if they care more about the job title or perks rather than they do the work, if they just like telling other people what to do. And her final piece of advice was, "Don't take the leadership job because you think it looks easy." (2)

I think that's exactly what Jesus was trying to tell James and John in this passage, "Don't ask to be leaders in the kingdom of God because you think it looks easy." Jesus fully understood and fully accepted the sacrifice God required of him. And he wanted James and John, and us, to understand that if we choose to follow him, then we are following him all the way to the cross. Jesus' glory wasn't the glory of power and authority and respect. It wasn't the glory of getting the best seat in the house, being first in line, being the center of attention. Jesus' glory was in doing the will of God, no matter what it cost. That's the cup he drank from. And that's the cup he offers to his followers. How do you know if you are ready to drink from his cup? When you are ready to die to your own agenda, your own privileges and comforts, and orient your life around the will and the works of God.

You may remember a shocking event that occurred back in October 1983, when suicide bombers targeted a Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, that housed hundreds of U.S. Marines and French soldiers. Three hundred and seven people died in the attack.

A few days after the attack, Marine Corps Commandant Paul X. Kelly visited the hospital in Germany where the surviving soldiers were taken for medical treatment. Among the soldiers he visited was Lance Corporal Jeffrey Lee Nashton. Nashton, only 23 years old, suffered a fractured skull, collapsed lungs, a fractured leg, a broken arm, and concrete splinters in his eyes. Commandant Kelly would comment later that there were so many tubes in Nashton's body that he "looked more like a machine than a man."

When Kelly reached Nashton's bedside, he says Nashton reached up and ran his fingers along the stars on Kelly's military coat. Due to the tubes in his throat, Nashton was unable to speak. But he reached over and scribbled a couple of words on a piece of paper beside his bed. Kelly leaned over to read it. Corporal Nashton had simply written "Semper Fi"—the Marine motto which means, "Forever faithful." In spite of his suffering, in spite of his wounds, Lance Corporal Nashton was determined to remain "Forever faithful" to his calling. (3)

Pastor John Henry Jowett once said, "Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing." Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing. What has your ministry cost you—because each of us has a ministry of our own? What does it take to drink from Jesus' cup? The willingness to pay a price no one else will pay.

It also requires making the hard decisions no one else is willing to make. In the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy chapter 30, God said to the people of Israel, "I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life." Many of us have deluded ourselves into believing we can achieve our dreams without making hard decisions. And yet deciding is the most god-like characteristic which the Creator has bestowed upon us. If being created in His image means anything at all, it means we have the ability to choose. Not to choose means giving up that which makes us peculiarly human. Drinking from his cup means making the hard decisions no one else is willing to make.

British newspaper columnist Oliver Burkeman said he gained new insight on making major life decisions from therapist James Hollis. Most of us weigh a major decision by asking the question, "Will this make me happy?" Hollis said to change the question to, "Will this choice enlarge me or diminish me?" Which choice will lead to personal growth or wisdom? Which choice will make a greater positive impact on society? When you look back at the end of your life, which choice will leave a godly legacy? As Burkeman wrote, "... don't worry about burning bridges: irreversible decisions tend to be more satisfying, because now there's only one direction to travel— forward into whatever choice you made." (4)

Jesus is asking his followers to make an irreversible decision. To burn our bridges so that we can't go back to our old life. Instead, we have to move forward in only one direction— into the will and the good works God is calling us to.

I love what Bob Orr wrote on this subject. He said, "There is a prerequisite for knowing the will of God; and it's this—being willing to do it . . . God does not say to you, 'I'll show you my will and then I'd like you to decide if you'd like to do it.' He does not reveal His will so that you can speculate on it, so that you can think about it, or so you can take it to a church board meeting and vote on it. God reveals His will to people who are committed to do it no matter what it is."

You notice in the Bible that Jesus never asks anyone to think over a decision and get back to him. Or to use a corporate buzzword, Jesus never says, "Let's put a pin in it and discuss it later." He expects people to make a decision now. In order to make instantaneous decisions that are also wise, you need clear vision, and you need to know your desired end result. Jesus had a clear vision of what he was offering his followers: the kingdom of God. Eternal life. A new heaven and a new earth. What is that worth to you? It was so important to Jesus that he gave his very life for it.

One last thing. **Drinking from his cup means being willing to give more than you expect to get.** Calvin Coolidge once put it like this: "No person was ever honored for what he received. Honor has been the reward for what he gave." Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Isn't it interesting? In a restaurant where we receive poor service, we may still leave a 20% tip. A restaurant where we receive better service may receive a little more. Then there is that which we give to God. For some reason we would be more embarrassed to leave a tip of one or two percent in a restaurant than in God's house. The cup from which Jesus and his

disciples drank meant giving everything they had. Are you able to drink from that same cup?

When the Soviet Union occupied Romania in 1944, Christians and Christian churches were forced to “go underground” to escape persecution from the occupying Communist government. Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand spent 14 years in prison for preaching the gospel. His captors smashed four of his vertebrae and either cut or burned 18 holes in his body, but they could not defeat him. He testified, “Alone in my cell, cold, hungry, and in rags, I danced for joy every night.”

But there was another man in prison with Wurmbrand. He had been an unbeliever until Pastor Wurmbrand brought him to the Lord. He was suffering for his faith too. And Pastor Wurmbrand was acutely aware that if he had not brought this man to Christ, the man would be living a comfortable life in the world instead of being tortured in a Communist prison. At one point, he turned to his fellow prisoner and asked, “Have you any resentment against me that I brought you to Christ?”

Put yourself in this man’s shoes. He was innocent of any crime. He had lost his job and his freedom. He was imprisoned and tortured. And his only crime was believing in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Imagine the moment that Pastor Wurmbrand prayed with him to receive Jesus as his Savior. Imagine Jesus standing nearby and asking him, “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” Are you really willing to pay the price?

The man responded, “I have no words to express my thankfulness that you brought me to the wonderful Savior. I would never have it another way.” (5)

How about you? Are you willing to do whatever is necessary—whatever Christ may call upon you to do? Are you willing to pay a price greater than others are willing to pay, to make hard decisions others are unwilling to make and to give more than others are willing to give? Need I say to you that this church has been built through the years because at its heart were a group of people who were willing to drink from Christ’s cup and be baptized with his baptism? Their names are not known like St. Paul’s or Simon Peter’s. But they are truly disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, and whether they sit at the right and left hand of Jesus or not, they are most certainly in his presence.

How about you? Are you made of such stuff? Will your contributions to this world live long after you are gone? Will the earth be a better place because you have walked upon it?

1. “The 20 weirdest and most wonderful employee perks (guaranteed to make you feel jealous) . . .” by Mark Wilkinson, Coburg Banks, <https://www.coburgbanks.co.uk/blog/friday-funnies/the-20-weirdest-and-most-wonderful-employee-perks/>.

2. "Ten Signs You're Leadership Material -- And Ten Signs You're Not" by Liz Ryan *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2017/11/06/ten-signs-youre-leadership-material-and-ten-signs-youre-not/?sh=572ae7c133b6>.
3. *Children at Risk*, J. Dobson & Gary Bauer, Word, 1990, pp. 187-188. <https://www.sermonsearch.com/sermon-illustrations/2245/bombing-in-beirut/>.
4. "Oliver Burkeman's last column: the eight secrets to a (fairly) fulfilled life" by Oliver Burkeman, *The Guardian*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/sep/04/oliver-burkemans-last-column-the-eight-secrets-to-a-fairly-fulfilled-life>.
5. *Illusaurus*.
ChristianGlobe Network, Inc., [Dynamic Preaching Fourth Quarter Sermons](#), by King Duncan

Courtesy of Msgr. Joseph A. Pellegrino

There is an expression in the world of sports that a particular player deserves to be called the GOAT. Now years ago, if an athlete was called a goat, it meant that his performance at a game was so poor that he bore much of the responsibility for the team losing. But that is not how the term goat is used now. To be a goat is to be the Greatest of All Time. Here in Tampa Bay, our football team has Tom Brady, a player who is commonly referred to as the GOAT. People may claim that Michael Jordan is the GOAT in professional basketball. Others might say that the title GOAT belongs to LeBron James.

Some athletes are far from being GOATS, but act as though they were. They have an entourage of people who are continually telling them how wonderful they are. They lord it over their teammates as though the others were second rate citizens in their world of wonderfulness.

But you don't have to go to sports to witness those who are so full of themselves that they act as though they are goats. James and John in today's gospel acted that way. They felt that they should sit at the right hand and left hand of the Lord when Jesus came into His Glory. They wanted to lord it over the other disciples. Or, at least they wanted it to be clear that they were much better than the others. Jesus told them that they were clueless. They didn't understand where greatness came from.

There are many people in all walks of life who strut around as legends in their own minds. They may be professionals, like lawyers or doctors or professors who look down on others, or they may be people who hold a position of respect in their families, like parents or grandparents, but do so in an arrogant way, as tyrants rather than as sources of family love. Perhaps we all do this at times. We may act as though we are great, but the truth is that those who think that they are GOATS, are, like James and John, clueless. They, we, don't understand from where greatness comes.

Jesus understood how to be great, though. He told James and John, and He tells us, that greatness comes through service. On the night of the Last Supper, before Jesus gave us His Body and Blood, He washed the feet of His disciples, and then gave them and us this mandate: what you have seen me do, you also must do. That was the path to greatness. That was the way that we could become GOATS.

Think about St. Teresa of Calcutta. She died in 1997, so most of us have been blessed to have been witnesses to some of her life. Everyone would admit that she was a great lady. But how did she become great? She became great by emptying herself to serve the poorest of the poor, first in Calcutta and then throughout the world.

Think about people you know that you can say with confidence that he or she is a great person. My guess is that person is someone who continually reaches out to other people. Someone is sick, he or she is there. Someone is having a bad day, he or she is there. Someone needs help with a difficult job, he or she doesn't even need to

be asked. You see, truly great people have learned how to be great from He who is the One True Goat, Jesus Christ, the Greatest of All Time.

All of us have different gifts. We have a responsibility to develop our gifts in service to the Lord. What can I do best? What do you do best? Some people are capable of caring for the incarcerated with mercy, compassion and justice. Others have a great deal of empathy for the sick. Still others have a heart for the poor. Some are capable of teaching. Others are great parents not just to their own children but to those orphaned by the circumstances of their lives. We all have many talents. Our talents are given to us to serve others. We are called to develop these talents. We are called to greatness.

The Lord understands our failures, our limitations, our fears, the times that we lack confidence in ourselves to do His work. He sees this, but He also sees so much more. He sees our talent. He sees our love. He sees our determination to seek Him out in others and serve His Presence.

Some people think that because of situations in their past, they will never be good enough to bring Christ to others. Perhaps we all have those thoughts at time. We need to stop ourselves from that way of thinking. We have been called by Christ to be his disciples. We are Christians. We did not take Christianity on ourselves. We were given this Grace freely by the Lord. We are good enough. He makes us good enough.

It is not the size of a person's entourage that demonstrates that he or she is great. It is not the position of authority that a person holds that demonstrates his or her greatness. True greatness come from Jesus Christ. He calls us to be people of service. It is through service that every one of us is capable of becoming, in our own way, GOATS.