

Sons of Thunder, Part 2

Luke 6:14

One more lesson from these two Sons of Thunder that they had to learn. Let's turn to Matthew chapter 20 verse 20. This is a lesson that Jesus teaches James and John about ambition and humility. We're still in the context of Jesus and his Apostles moving toward Jerusalem. It says there in Matthew 20:17, "As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way, he said to them, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be delivered over the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified and then be raised on the third day.'" Yet another prediction of his death. Yet another moment of preparing them for something he knew that they didn't expect.

Immediately after making that prediction, look what happened. "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons and kneeling before him, she asked him for something. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to

him, 'Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.'" Stop there. Moms, you understand this. You want the best for your babies. Sitting at the right and the left of Jesus is something you would love to see for your children. Why? Because that says something about you as a mother, doesn't it? You love your kids; you want to see the best for them. And their mother, here is, the request is coming through her voice. No doubt she said this. Certainly, she is in full agreement, but it's the boys who are behind this request, make no mistake. Shrewdly, James and John enlisted their own mother, Salome, sister of Jesus' mother Mary. How would he refuse a request from his mother, right?

Jesus knows, here, though, he knows the source of the request, and he addresses the boys directly in his reply there in verse 22. The verb forms, here, are plural, and he's speaking to the boys. "Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am able to drink?'" Now if they were smart, they would say, No. But they hadn't been listening, "and they said to him, 'We are able.' And he said to them, 'You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my father.'"

James and John, they had no idea what it would mean to drink the cup Jesus was about to drink. They were way out of their depth, claiming that they were able to drink it. But notice what their ambition produced. In the next verses we see division. We see conflict. We see the arousal of division and, and pride, and, and self-centered ambition in the other disciples. That is what ambition, selfish ambition, produces. It inflames the same things in people around you. Look at verse 24, "When the ten heard about it, they were indignant at the brothers." They weren't indignant because they loved humility. They were indignant because they didn't get there first. So the reaction of the other Apostles, James and John aren't flustered by that. Probably expected it. They're just thankful they got there first.

They're thankful they had the shrewd plan, the business approach, of getting their mother to make the request. After all, they probably felt pretty well justified in requesting positions of honor. Here's a list of some excellent reasons, a bit of a resume for the promotion of the sons of Zebedee into prominent positions of leadership at the right hand and the left hand of Jesus in the millennial kingdom.

Here's the list. Number one: They came from a prominent family, one of wealth and influence. So that means they're accustomed to the company of people of status, unlike the rest of these uncultured disciples, Galileans. I mean, we've been down to Jerusalem. We know the kind of people that are going to be coming over to the millennial kingdom. We're accustomed with people of company, people of culture.

Number two: They possessed strong personalities, that made them capable leaders. They were, take charge, kind of guys, the kind of guys you need at your right hand and your left hand. Number three: They had a track record of success. I mean, who's going to build a kingdom on people who've never been tested before? We've been tested, proven in building a fishing business, carrying on our father's name.

Number four: They had close ties, family-wise, with Jesus. They were his cousins. You can always trust family. Furthermore, they're members of Jesus' inner circle, so Jesus had already selected them for special privilege and status, and here they are recognizing that, and so why not? They're intuitively right on the same page with Jesus, right at the right hand and the left hand, made perfect sense, right? They're obviously the most trustworthy, the most reliable, the most competent leaders of

the entire apostolic band. All that is left is the formal acknowledgement of their prominence and position and place next to Jesus over the rest of the Apostles.

Makes sense to men, doesn't it? I mean, they'd probably be on my list as well. I mean, who else are you going to put there? Some of those unknowns? People whose names you've struggled to remember? Definitely not going to put Peter there. That's going to be a wreck, right? Well, what makes sense to men, it's often quite the opposite in the economy of Christ's kingdom, isn't it? Look at Matthew 20:25, "Jesus called them to him and he said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be the first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"

Look, the ambition of greatness in the kingdom is to serve, is to be slave to all. Is that why you're here? Christ came to give his life as a ransom for many, and all those who follow him like James and John, both of whom that Christ said would drink the same cup of suffering; all those who follow Jesus will also give their lives in sacrificial love and service to Christ.

That's what it is. As Chuck read earlier, as we sang together, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

This brings us to a third and final point, here: their future. What's in their future? Their future: They became sons of love. They're nurtured as sons of Zebedee, they possess the nature of Sons of Thunder, but the future held forth a reality that they could never predict as their nurture and their nature are here bridled; they're here submitted into the service of Jesus Christ. James and John, both of them used mightily in the founding and the organization of the Jerusalem church. Peter had always seemed be with John, and John with Peter. They had a close friendship and relationship. After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, they remained close friends, ministry partners in those early days of the church.

James seemed to have drifted into more organizational leadership as kind of fit his nature, his personality. But Peter and John, they're out there doers; they're doing things. They're together at the temple healing the lame man in the name of Jesus of Nazareth in Acts chapter 3. They preach the Gospel in Solomon's portico. They're arrested together in Acts chapter 4. They testified together before the Jewish Sanhedrin. They are

loving it! The Pharisees, the Sadducees, they all look at them and notice that they're untrained men, but they're speaking with such power and authority, and they realize, Ah! They were with Jesus, that's the difference.

Later in Acts chapter 8, we referred to that earlier, the salvation of the Samaritans. It's Peter and John, again, who are deployed by the Jerusalem church to go and investigate a certain rumor. Philip the deacon preached the Gospel in Samaria, the Samaritans responded in repentance and faith, and there was a remarkable thing happening. So in Acts 8:14, it says that "When the apostles at Jerusalem," and "when they heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they'd only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. So they laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." Again, such a good thing that the Lord denied that earlier request to pulverize them with fire from heaven. Such a poignant illustration to James and John that the kind of divine love that characterized the Lord's ministry, that same love needed to be the energizing and compelling and binding force on all their life and ministry.

James and John, they're kind of like bookends on the lives of the twelve Apostles. James became the first of them to die, and John was the last of the Twelve to die, all of them dying in faithful service to Christ. After the death, resurrection, ascension of Jesus; after the birth of the church in Jerusalem, quite in line with his natural character, James had quickly become a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church. Paul called he and John, two of the pillars of that church, James being the most prominent. When King Herod Agrippa I, when he wanted to curry favor with the Jews, he found their most prominent leader and he killed him. It says, there, in Acts chapter 12:1-2 that "at that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with a sword," cutting off his head. He was cut down in the prime of his life. Such a strong, naturally gifted leader, why him? Why not, like, Thaddeus or some other guy we don't even remember. Why James?

Look, all this teaches us that there is just no way whatsoever for us to predict how Jesus is going to use his servants, in what capacity, for what purpose, for what duration. What else does it teach us? None of us is indispensable to the plan. James was powerful, no doubt. Powerful preacher, powerful



leader, powerful strength in Jerusalem in that church. But he's not indispensable, only Christ is.

The historian Eusebius in his *Church History*, he records the following about the martyrdom of James, "Concerning James, Clement says the one who led James the judgment seat," this is like a slave or a servant, "when he saw him bearing his testimony, he was moved, and confessed that he himself was also a Christian. They were both, therefore, he says, led away together, and on the way he begged James to forgive him, and he, James, after considering a little, said, 'Peace be with thee,' and he kissed him. And thus they were both beheaded at the same time."

It sounds like James, here, had learned a lesson in tenderness. He watched how Jesus spared the Samaritans so they'd later turn to salvation at the preaching of Philip the deacon. And here he now had the ability to determine friend from foe, didn't he? He kissed the friend before he died with him. He directed his zeal for the truth toward bearing a perfect testimony of Christ even in the moment of his martyrdom. James drank the bitter cup of suffering, followed his Lord into glory, but his suffering didn't last long because beheading is a quick death.

John's cup of suffering, that one lasted quite a bit longer. Whereas James is the first martyr, the first to die as a martyr, John's future contained this dubious honor of remaining, to become the oldest living Apostle. And that is a unique form of suffering, and it's not just the bodily aches and pains and dilapidation of this outer man that some of you can testify to how difficult that is. Your life seems to be just a scheduled set of doctor visits and pills and medications and everything else. Basically, that's how you set your clock. But it's not just that. It's not just the pain of old bones and weakened tendons and all of that.

John had to watch his own brother die, beheaded by a cruel king. Then he had to watch all of his friends die, cut down one by one, leaving him all alone. He had to watch the pain of other Christians suffer, his own children and spiritual grandchildren suffering difficult trials, chased by a hostile empire, by angry Jews. He had to watch some defect, turn away from the truth. Broke his heart.

John, himself, was hunted down in his later years. He's persecuted by an increasingly hostile Roman government; another form of suffering, too. I mean, extreme physical discomfort in his golden years, the years you want to retire, and he's running

from the government. No retirement for the Apostle John. Jesus had plans for John to outlive the rest of the Apostles. He wanted to use him to author some of the most profoundly contemplative books of the New Testament.

Every Greek student will tell you that John's Greek expression is some of the simplest and straightforward in the New Testament. It's the perfect text to learn Greek from. And yet, the truths it contains are some of the most profound and searching in the entire Bible. It's time and reflection for John, that, that certainly provided maturity in his writing, and the Holy Spirit intended that for a unique form of the Gospel, what Clement called "a spiritual gospel," and what we can all recognize: It brings out the profound theology in Jesus' life and ministry. And then John wrote three of his epistles, finally the Book of Revelation.

His writing is full of love, even as he speaks in such antithetical, black-and-white language. And it's in the interest of truth that John speaks with such boldness and clarity, and this Son of Thunder is bold and thundering in his text, in his letters, in his writing, isn't he? But listen, it's with the tender, kind, compassionate heart of a shepherd, a true shepherd of the apostolic church. He outlived the rest of the Apostles,

and he became the quintessential example of the Apostles to the church. His love and affection, it shines through, especially in his pastoral letters: 1, 2, and 3 John.

He often addresses his fellow believers as his beloved, as his little children. All of them by this time are younger than he is. For John and there's no greater joy than for him as a parent of all these spiritual children than to see that his children walk in the truth. Love and humility, tenderness, compassion, all those traits John learned from Jesus Christ, and he practiced them to the very end of his life. He modeled them for his fellow believers for the rest of his life.

He did that as a pastor of a church founded by Paul in Ephesus. That's where he lived out many of his years according to the early church fathers. Irenaeus, for one. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp. Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John, so you see the connection there. Ephesus is where John wrote his Gospel, somewhere in the 80s or 90s. John also wrote his pastoral letters, 1 through 3 John, during his ministry in Ephesus, somewhere between 80 and 90 and 95. Such a fruitful time of ministry.

It would have been nice to stay put in Ephesus and settle in, but once again Christ had other plans. The empire put

Christianity in its crosshairs sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, started to persecute Christianity more systematically, and that's when John suffered persecution under the emperor Domitian, brother of Titus, the destroyer of Jerusalem. As the last remaining Apostle, the key authoritative voice of the Christian movement, Domitian banished John to Patmos. It was an island in the Aegean Sea off the west coast of modern Turkey, a very harsh environment for an aging man. But it was the setting for Jesus to come and visit John and deliver to him his final revelation somewhere around AD 95.

After the death of the emperor Domitian, when banishment was lifted, John was released from his exile on Patmos. He returned to Asia Minor; he went back to Ephesus, continuing pastoring that church. He's essentially there the Apostle of all those churches of Asian Minor, traveling to and from them to exercise oversight, to resolve disputes of doctrine and practice. He died around AD 90, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. And he was so frail at that time that he had to be carried into the church and out of the church, and he was often overheard saying, "My little children, love one another." Where'd he get that? It's interesting that we wouldn't have the source of that saying of Jesus apart from the Upper Room

discourse recorded in John 13-17. That's why he comes down to us as the Apostle of Love.

It's John whom God used to make sure that we heard from Jesus, this in John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." Again, in John 15:12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." John 15:17, "These things I command so that you will love one another."

Echoes of Jesus' refrain come through in John's epistles as well, especially 1 John. And you can think of him writing these epistles at the same time he's kind of buttoning up the Gospel. 1 John 3:11, "This is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." Again in verse 23, "This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he has commanded us." 1 John 4:7, "Beloved, let us love another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God."

John uses the word, love, nearly sixty times in his Gospel, another fifty-two times in his three short epistles, most of those references *agapé*. In fact, all the references in 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, *agapé*. I think that's why Christians love to hand

out copies of the Gospel of John, right, to other people. I understand that. Makes perfect sense to help new believers anchor themselves deeply in the love that God has for them, to learn how they must express that love for one another. That is the connection that we find in 1 John Chapter 4, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us. His love is perfected in us."

You know what other word is prominent in John's writings. It's the word, truth, repeated more than 80 times. Another prominent theme in John's Gospel, his epistles is the concept of obedience. Repeated teaching that those who truly belong to God, those who truly love God, who are truly loved by God, are known as belonging to God because they're the ones keeping his commandments. Jesus said, John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Verse 21, "Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. The word that you hear is not mine, but the fathers who sent me."

So listen, keep handing out those Gospels of John, but make sure you help those readers connect the biblical concept of love with truth and obedience. And make sure you help them separate their understanding of love, to define it as a worldly understanding of love, and to see that true love is connected with truth, connected with obedience. There are those who profess to love Christ, but because they actually love the world, they do not walk in obedience, and they're going to want to read John's emphasis on love through their own worldly grid. We have to help those people, pastorally, concerned as Christians, we have to help those people see the biblical definition of love, rejoicing in God's truth, obedience to God's Word because that's absolutely vital. It's life giving.

"Love one another." That was the refrain on John's lips to the very end. May we practice that refrain practically in our own church. What Jesus extended John's life to deliver to us, may we live that out. Ask yourself as you leave today, how am I practically loving others according to the truth of Scripture. How am I loving God in obedience to his Word? Do I even pay attention to his Word and pick it up to find commands to obey so that I can please him? Ask yourself those questions. Take a good, hard, practical look at your life just like the sensitive John did, examining himself, confessing his sin and wanting to



be obedient to his Lord and his Savior. There's nothing greater for us to do than to be known as belonging to Jesus because we manifest his love to one another, amen? Let's pray.

Father, we want to thank you for this all-too-brief treatment of James and John, these Sons of Thunder, but men that you turned into prominent and passionate, devoted followers of yours who really did manifest your character, the character of your love, the strength of it, the shepherding concern that love has. We're so grateful to belong to you, to profess this truth to people around us. We just pray that you'd help us to not be partisan, exclusive like John and James wanted to be, not to be angry, judgmental, uncompromising in that sense. Father, we try to exclude everybody around us, but to be embracing those who truly belong to you.