

Disciples Series. #8: James, Son of Zebedee: The First to Die
Mark 10:35-45 (wait to read Acts 12:1-5)
By John Gill

As you may know if you have been in worship recently, we are in the middle of a sermon series on the twelve disciples of Jesus. We have looked at seven so far.

Our disciple for this morning is one of several “Jameses” we find in the New Testament. Sometimes called, “James, the Greater,” this James is one of two Jameses among the 12 Disciples; the other James, James, Son of Alphaeus (or James the Lesser), we will look at next Sunday.

In addition, there is another prominent James in the Early Church, who was the brother of Jesus and became the leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem. We read a great deal about “James, the Brother of Jesus” (also known as James the Just) in the Book of Acts, as he and Paul lock horns over the issue of whether Gentile converts to Christianity must first become Jews.

Then there is the “Letter of James” in the Bible, which has traditionally been attributed to James, the Brother of Jesus, but which might come from the hand of a different James altogether.

In any case, our focus this morning will be on the disciple, “James, the Greater,” one of the two sons of a fisherman named Zebedee.

You will recall that, after Jesus called the brothers, Andrew and Peter, to become “fishers of men,” he came across another pair of brothers fishing with their father. Jesus called James and John, and they, too, followed Jesus.

Together with Peter, James and John became the most trusted friends of Jesus – an inner circle among the disciples, who accompanied Jesus when the other disciples were left behind. For instance, they were the ones to witness the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead – they were taken with Jesus to the Mt. of Transfiguration and saw the vision of Jesus speaking with Elijah and Moses – and they were the three disciples Jesus took farther into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with him on the night of his betrayal. Yes, Peter, James, and John were Jesus’ closest advisors and friends.

But they weren’t saintly men – far from it! In the Gospels, they exhibited some very unflattering characteristics: On one occasion, a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus, and James and John ask Jesus if they could call down fire from heaven to destroy the people there. It’s no wonder they got the nickname, “Sons of Thunder!”

Another occasion where we see some unbecoming traits in these two brothers was the passage read a few moments ago: Here, their raw ambition and prideful-arrogance are exposed and condemned by Jesus. James and John were looking forward to the earthy Kingdom which they believed Jesus was about to establish, and they wanted a piece of the action: “Jesus, when you lead the revolution that will push the Romans out of our land – when you sit on the throne of your ancestor, King David – don’t forget your friends who have stood by you all this time. Promise us that you will let us have the places of honor in your royal court.”

Pretty arrogant and ambitious – wouldn't you say? But Jesus tries to tell them they have it all wrong: "You don't know what you are asking for..." Jesus says, "are you willing to suffer and die with me?... can you drink the cup of suffering I must drink?... can you be baptized in the way I must be baptized?"

And then, Jesus made a sobering prediction: "You will indeed drink the cup I must drink and be baptized in the way I must be baptized... you will suffer and die for my sake. Then, if it is God's will, you will find a place of honor in his Kingdom."

But James and John still didn't understand what lay ahead for them in Jerusalem, they were looking for a throne, not a cross – for crown, not a crown of thorns. And they had no idea what the future would hold for them as they lived out their lives as followers of Jesus.

I think this poses one of the most intriguing contrasts that I have discovered in my study of all twelve disciples. Here are two brothers who follow Christ, identical in personality and inseparable as companions – who have completely different experiences when they become Apostles in the Early Church.

As we have already learned from our study of John, the Beloved Disciple, John was the only disciple who we believe died a natural death. He had a long and successful ministry, outliving all his companions by decades. Yes, John had a lengthy and distinguished career.

So, if this tradition is right, when Jesus was speaking about "drinking the cup of suffering," and dying for his sake, he must NOT have been speaking to John. Instead, his words must have been intended for James, because unlike his brother, John, James would be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice for being a follower of Jesus. Of the twelve disciples, we have a scriptural account of the death of only two – Judas Iscariot (who died by his own hand) and James. In fact, James was the first of the Disciples of Jesus to die a martyr's death. We read about his death in the Book of Acts (12:1-3):

¹ *About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church.* ² *He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.* ³ *After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.*

So, we know how James died. But what do we know about his ministry?

Tradition tells us that after the Ascension of Christ, James traveled to Spain and preached in the Jewish colonies there. Perhaps you have heard about the pilgrimage journey people make in Spain to this day - called "Campo de Santiago" – also known as "The way of James." Although we have no historical evidence to verify James' journey in Spain, it seems very likely to be true, especially since, in the first chapter of Acts, James is conspicuously absent from the activities of his companions, Peter and John. In any case, it is clear that James returned to Jerusalem for the Passover in the year 44 A.D., and there King Herod Agrippa had him beheaded.

And therein lies the irony – two brothers, both devoted followers of Christ: one lives to a ripe old age, the other has his life cut short.

You know, I think there is an important lesson to be learned from the lives of the brothers, James and John – and that is this: We never know what the future will hold. We don't know what price we may be asked to pay for our faith.

Unlike many periods in the history of the church, we in 21st century America, are not often confronted with making a choice between life and faith. We live in a culture that, at least in principle, is a Christian nation where being a believer in Christ has been considered not only acceptable, but respectable. Even with the onslaught of “secularism,” America still is one of the most religious countries in the world – although we are seeing a disturbing trend toward more and more secularism with every year that passes. Even so, few of us will ever be asked to make the ultimate sacrifice for our faith, as many of our brother and sister Christians around the world today have had to suffer. We can thank God that as American Christians, our experience will, most likely be more like that of John than like his brother, James.

Sadly, the world is quickly changing, and not for the better. There seems to be a rising tide of hostility against the Christian faith, both at home and abroad – ranging from indifference to apathy to active opposition – and bordering on oppression. As we sit worshipping comfortably this morning, we take our faith for granted. But a time may come when we, like James, will have to stand up and be counted as Christians and be willing to sacrifice for our faith. We may even have to one day choose between life and death.

In his book, Twelve Ordinary Men, John McArthur recounts a tradition – perhaps apocryphal – concerning the martyrdom of James that speaks to how James’ life had been transformed by his faith in Christ – a legend that embellishes on the scriptural text I read from the Book of Acts. The historian Eusebius passes on an account of James’ death that comes from St. Clement of Alexandria:¹

According to the legend, after James was arrested, a guard led James to the judgment-seat. When the guard heard James bearing his testimony, he was so moved that he confessed that he also was a Christian. The guard then joined James in being condemned to death, and they were both led to the place of execution side by side. As they got near to the place of execution, the man begged James to forgive and bless him. James turned to him and said, “Peace be with thee,” and kissed him. As brothers in faith, both James and his guard were beheaded together.¹

May God forbid that we should ever have to make the choice James and his guard made – to choose between our life and our faith. But if that day comes – IF that day comes – how will we choose? Will we be willing to “drink the cup of suffering,” along with Christ? Would we accept the baptism of death in the way that Jesus was baptized? Would we be willing to give up our life rather than to give up our faith?

I believe this is the challenge we hear from James. How strong is your faith? What’s it worth to you? What price are you willing to pay for it?

Both James, and his brother, John - as different as their experiences were, were men of great faith. Both are called “saints” and are considered pillars of the church – because both were willing to give their all for Christ – James in death, and John in life.

Paul expresses the experience of James and John beautifully in Romans (14:7-8). He writes: *“None of us lives for himself only, none of us dies for himself only. If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die, it is for the Lord that we die. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”* And in Philippians 1:20, Paul writes: *“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but*

that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For me, living is Christ, and dying is gain."

May it always be that we are strong enough in our faith that, if (God forbid) we are asked, "*Are ye able to lay down your life for Christ,*" our answer will be, "*Yes, Lord, we are able.*"

Closing/Prayer:

"Still the Master whispers down eternity, and heroic spirits answer, now as then in Galilee.

Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine. Remold them. Make like thee, divine."

God, as we encounter people this week, may your "guiding radiance above us" be a beacon of love that leads them to you. Amen.

¹ McArthur, John. Twelve Ordinary Men. Thomas Nelson c. 2002. Page 93