You Know Not What You’re Asking

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. It has long been told that there is no such thing as a bad question. After all, a question is something that we use in order to find out information. It is something that we use in order to determine something. Questions in and of themselves require a certain amount of self confidence. Who here has ever asked a question, that as soon as it was out of your mouth you just knew that you shouldn’t have asked it? For instance, AC/DC is still a very popular band in Pittsburgh. If you tune into any of the classic rock stations it must be mandated by city law that at least one AC/DC song be played per 30 minutes of radio time. It’s ridiculous. Well in the year 2000 arguably the best football movie ever, Remember the Titans, came out and introduced my generation to a group called the Temptations. Now my baseball team was screwing around during a water break and someone was singing “Back in Black” by AC/DC in a very high falsetto voice. I heard someone ask, “Is that the Temptations song from Remember the Titans?” Everyone just stopped and looked at this poor kid and you saw the regret on his face instantly as he put the lyrics he had heard together in his head. Now fourth grade boys are ruthless and we certainly didn’t let this guy forget that question for the rest of the season. Now I would call that a bad question simply because it’s a question that he actually knew the answer to. But there’s a difference between a bad question due to a brain fart and a bad question that has some sinister motive. We know what these questions look like. They’re trap questions that seek to ensnare the person giving the answer. We see many examples of this in scripture when the Pharisees corner Jesus and seek to discredit him. One famous example comes when the Pharisees ask Jesus whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. This is clearly a trap as if he answered against the tax the Pharisees would have good reason to go to the Romans and claim that he was a rebel. If he answered in favor of the tax the Pharisees could then say that he was in fact an agent of Rome sent there to put the Jews further under the Roman thumb. The idea was to put him at odds with one set of authorities or another.

We come across quite a question in our Gospel lesson don’t we? What was going through your mind when you heard James and John ask, “**Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.**”? First I think that it’s important that we remember that before they asked that of Jesus they said, “**Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.**” That certainly changes things. In fact it shifts this from being a question to it being a demand. Not just that but it seems rather malicious doesn’t it? At the very least they are confident young men who feel they have something to prove. At worst, they are demanding that Jesus make them like him. They are demanding that they be given elevated status not just over the disciples, but over all people throughout history. In essence they want to make it Father, Son, Holy Spirit, James, and John. In doing so they would establish a family dynasty here on earth that would last forever. After all, they were gods themselves now. Now they sit at either side of Him on the throne. Do you know who it usually is who sits at either side of the king in a throne room? It is usually his most trusted advisors. It is usually the advisors that the king will lean on when difficult situations arise. They are also the first people that the king pays, and they are paid well. If you look you can see these machinations beginning to form in the minds of the sons of Zebedee. **“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”** This is a show of arrogance, and it is the desires of evil hearts. First, they are not worthy of being made like God, for they were sinners. Jesus was a man who knew no sin and so right off the bat there are issues. Not to mention the fact that we have seen the evidence of what happens when kings and rulers are given absolute authority. If the previous century didn’t teach us that, then nothing will. When sinful hearts are given absolute authority, people suffer a great deal. Now imagine if sinful hearts were made like God. It’s a terrifying prospect truly. It would be something capable of oppression and destruction, the likes of which the world has never seen. And knowing sinful hearts, the authority of men like God would be put to misuse.

How many times are we like this? I’m not saying that we demand to be made the kings and queens of the world no but we certainly demand. We have a certain expectation of things. For instance, last night Penn State won its seventh wrestling national title in 8 years. If you’re a fan of wrestling you have to find the championship bout at 184. It came down to this essentially, with a win Penn State would clinch, with a loss, there would still be a chance that the Ohio State Buckeyes could take the title. Now I don’t know about you, but I don’t like to take unnecessary risks. This was a high pressure moment. Both wrestlers not only want to win, but need to win in order to help their team either clinch, or stay alive. It was an amazing match. It left your jaw on the floor no matter which side you were rooting for. After the match was over however, the wrestler from Penn State gave an interview where he was asked for his reaction to having clinched the team national title for the third year in a row. He said, “That’s expected.” Now what kind of fan base expects their team to win national titles every year? Going away from sports, what kind of demands do we have in our own lives? We certainly expect to live a certain way don’t we? We expect that since we pay our taxes and are citizens of this country we will have certain rights, the police will come when they are called, we will have access to running water, electricity, cable television, wireless internet, the list goes on and on. We have a certain set of demands when it comes to living here on earth. We have a certain set of demands and we do not like it when they aren’t met. When our demands aren’t met we get cranky and upset. Sometimes it leads us to change things for the better. We demanded better health, and throughout the years we have developed medicines, methods, and technologies to make it so that people are living longer and have a better chance to survive disease. We demanded prosperity, so we now live in a country where the number one health concern is obesity. We have too much to eat, as opposed to a country like North Korea, who’s population is so malnourished that on average they are 3 inches shorter than their South Korean neighbors and have a life expectancy that is 11 years shorter. We have these demands because that is what we have come to expect. It makes us take things for granted. Prayer is one of the things that we take for granted the most. We ourselves use prayer like a requisition form. It is used to make requests of God. But is that what our relationship with God is supposed to be? Is it supposed to be that which is similar to a customer in a store? No. It is not meant to be that way. God wants you to know him, not simply ask of him. That is why we read His word, and come to his altar. We come to the font to be made his. These are all actions that he does for us to give us a relationship with him. A personal relationship, because each of us were personally brought to the waters of baptism, he knows us by name. Even the hairs on our heads are numbered. But like for James and John, that’s not enough for us. The relationship is not enough and we demand more.

It is important for us to understand that our God has done so much for us. After all, the man that James and John were demanding of, would die for them. And their hearts, like ours, called out “Crucify him! Crucify him!” That is what sinful hearts demand, the death of Jesus. And Jesus gave up his life for us, willingly. Next week we will walk through that story. We will hear the account as Jesus bore our sin. It will be dark on Friday, but it will be bright on Sunday. Have you missed the Alleluias? Me too. They’re coming back soon. They’ll come back as an announcement of Christ’s victory over death. And thus we receive the benefit of everlasting life. This is the lengths to which our God goes to have a relationship with us. He went so far as to die for us. He went so far as to say that since we are his, the grave is not a final resting place rather that is with him, in the halls of his house. That is what our God has given for us because we are his. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.