

Sons of Thunder

Luke 6:14

March 26, 2017

Today we're looking at the two sons of Zebedee, James and John. Those two brothers, James and John, they belong to that first group of Apostles, that inner circle, and that included two other brothers, Simon and Andrew. And as you might imagine, two sets of brothers knowing each other, knowing each other in Galilee and Capernaum, in the fishing industry together, they were a pretty tight group. These three of these four, they were selected by Christ for even more special privilege, for intimate access at key moments in Jesus' life and ministry. James is the older brother. He's always listed first in the list of Apostles, and John is his younger brother tagging along. And of all the Apostles, it was James who was the first to die as a martyr. He's the first martyr of all the Apostles. The younger brother John, he's the last to die, not of martyrdom but dying of old age in Ephesus. Both men had been used mightily of the Lord in their lifetime. James had a short life span; John had a long one. They were both used mightily, and for both of them, they

were used in ways that no one would have expected or predicted, looking at their young lives.

These two men, they were known for having a strong and brash and thundering set of personalities. They're like two strong bulls crashing through a china shop, smashing everything they come into contact with. We got to get an early hint of that in Mark's Gospel, where in his list of the twelve Apostles, he listed them, and in Mark 13:16-17, he noted that James the Son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, he noted their nickname. He said "to whom Jesus gave the name 'Boanerges,' that is, 'Sons of Thunder.'" Mark translates that Aramaic nickname "Boanerges" into Greek: "Sons of Thunder." That's a moniker that could refer to the effects of being struck by lightning. They'll leave you there in a smoldering ash heap once they come through. Or it could refer to being loud and volatile, like stomping around as in a house of thunder. How would you like to be known, your personality on the pages of Scripture, known by a weather bulletin, a strong weather warning? These guys are strong men, strong personalities.

But you can also see in their strength of personality, you can see that they were deeply sincere men. They were acutely intense; they were extremely focused men. Leader types. The raw material to be very, very useful. But apart from the sanctifying work of Jesus by his Holy Spirit, all that power and force of personality is destructive, is unrestrained thunder and lightning. In a similar way to Peter, Jesus intended to transform these two men into useful vessels for ministry, but in a way that was different from Peter. Simon Peter, you understand, never had been rock-like any time in his life. He'd always been vacillating and waffling. Jesus made him something he wasn't. He called him "the Rock" because of what he intended to do. These men, though, James and John, they already possessed the thundering material. They already possessed raw leadership material. They possessed force of intellect, strength of personality. They had charisma as leaders. But on their own they would become nothing more than another version of their father: a self-made man, somewhat wealthy, prominent, a long list of friends, varying lists of enemies.

None of that counts for the Kingdom, though, does it? The wealth, the selfish ambition, fame and influence—it all dies with the death of that person. The Lord intended to do something

very different with these two Sons of Thunder: make them useful for Kingdom purposes. So he bridled their natures. He restrained their destructive tendencies, and he channeled their natural energy into something useful through the power of that chief Christian virtue of love. He bound all those loose ends together and put it through the channel and the restraint of *agapé* love.

While James died early, he was cut down in the prime of his life, John lived on, and he's become known to us, coming down through the centuries, known as the Apostle of Love. You've heard that, right? John, the Apostle of Love. What picture is in your mind's eye when you think about John as the Apostle of Love? For many who have been raised in the context of American evangelicalism, I'm afraid that the portrait of the Apostle of Love is somewhat distorted. Many think of this Apostle of Love as someone who is known for being really, really nice. He's non-judgmental, for sure. He speaks with an even cadence, soft, mellow tones. He's usually wearing a sweater. Some might see him as somewhat effeminate. He's got a flowing mane of hair; there's no stiffness in his spine, no sharpness to his profile. He is, after all, the disciple who leaned back on Jesus' breast, right? He liked to cuddle. He's kind of like a big, soft teddy bear.

If you've ever been tempted to think that way about John, just stop for few minutes and read his mail. 1 John 1:6: "If we say have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." 1 John 2:18-19: "Children, it is the last hour, and as you've heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore, we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us. For if they had been of us, they would have continued with us, but they went out that it might become plain that they are not of us." That's a very "us and them" mentality, isn't it? Or this from 1 John 3, where we read earlier: "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness. Sin is lawlessness." No gray areas there, are there? No soft and fluffy. In his second epistle, John warns, he confronts, he instructs a Christian woman and her children, against showing Christian hospitality to the wrong people. He says this: "Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God." Period. "Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. So if anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting. For whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works."

Wow! Strong, strong stuff! Love. True love. Christian love. Agapé love. That kind of love demands truth-telling. It demands discernment, confrontation, rebuke, warning, and correction in righteousness. Listen, beloved, without those elements, it's not love. It's just a cheap, cowardly imitation that we would better call worldly sentimentality. And that's much of what dominates evangelicalism today. And James and John, they were not sentimental men, but they were loving, later, after Christ had his way with them. They weren't soft, fuzzy teddy bears, not at all. These men were men with backbone and grit. They were made useful by learning from Christ what it meant to love God and what it meant to love people.

We've got to go back to the beginning, though, and see where they started and what they learned along the way. And I tell you, when I hear this, for me personally, because I have a little bit of this in my nature, maybe from some accounts a lot of it, I'm very encouraged to see what God did in their lives, to see how Christ can take any personality, any background, any rough edges, and he can sand it all down and make it useful for his purposes. He channels all things to his good effect, to a

heart that belongs to him. That is such an encouragement, beloved.

Some outline points for you to help you jot down a few notes if you'd like. We're going to talk first about their nurture, then about their nature, and then about their future. Their nurture, their nature, and then their future. First, their nurture. Their nurture. They were sons of Zebedee, and James and John were originally known because of the prominence of their father Zebedee. Often they're identified as "the sons of Zebedee," which indicates that Zebedee was a significant man, most likely in connection to his success as a businessman. When Jesus first called James and John to follow, they were with their father Zebedee. You may remember, Mark 1:19, they were sitting in their father's fishing boat, mending their nets. And Jesus called them. They left their father in the boat with the hired servants, and they followed him. All that—owning a boat, hiring men to help with the business—those are indications of some level of material prosperity, signs that things are going well financially, to have your own boat, to have hired men, and all of that. But beyond that there's evidence that this Zebedee, he wasn't just wealthy and prominent in the Galilee area, but he had a connection to the temple in Jerusalem, perhaps through

business connections, more likely probably through family connection in relation to the house of the high priest.

We noted last time that Peter's access into the courtyard of the high priest was through the Apostle John, a son of Zebedee. John 18:15 says, John "was known to the high priest, so he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest." That is, he got a pass. "But Peter, he had to stand outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, he went out, spoke to the servant girl who watched at the door, and he brought Peter in." He vouched for Peter. He had some mark of credibility to his name. It's a pretty big deal. Since he was probably only in his late twenties, early thirties at this time, the access that he had into the high priest's courtyard had to be due to his father's relationship to Annas, not his own. That name "Zebedee" opened doors from Galilee all the way down to Judea, as far away as that capital city of Jerusalem, even into the political heart of Jerusalem, the household of the high priest. Like many business men, Zebedee had to be a naturally strong man, a lot of confidence, very strong personality.

And these two boys are chips off that old block. Growing up with wealth, having charge over hired men, hiring and firing, all those things, familiarity with those kinds of roles of authority and leadership from a young age certainly had a shaping effect on the personalities of James and John. That is to say that they were comfortable with authority from a young age. They were used to being in charge. They were accustomed to having people defer to them. They were accustomed to people paying attention to what they said, even as young men. They were comfortable with the privileges of status and influence.

Maybe the warning in Proverbs 18:23 is to them, that "the poor use entreaties, but the rich answer roughly." Why do the rich answer roughly? Because they can. That can be a common tendency among those who possess wealth and influence, and their kind of wealth in particular, self-made wealth, earned through hard work, callouses on the hands, time under the sun, sweat and blood. That can make for a certain roughness in the personality, a certain intolerance with slackers, an irritation with those who don't put out enough like you do. You lead by example. You demand that people follow and do what you say. Why? Because you're doing it before them. You have a prejudice against those

who don't measure up, and impatience with people who are wimpy, not of their cut of cloth.

That's their father's side. What about their mother? On their mother's side, there's another notable fact about this family that they were nurtured in. The mother of James and John was a woman named Salome. She's the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. You know what? That makes James and John cousins to Jesus on their mother's side. When they discovered that Jesus was the Messiah, it was remarkable, first of all, that they had that family connection, which they did notice and they did later try to use to their advantage. We'll see that a little bit later. But it's also remarkable that these two men, in contrast to Jesus' brothers, that James and John, they weren't offended by Jesus' special, unique calling and his notoriety. Rather than rejecting Jesus, James and John followed him. They weren't offended by him. They embraced him in belief, in faith.

You might, and with a cynical view of the text, you might think their affection for Jesus and their following him at this early age was suspect, that following him maybe was a facade, just an attempt to use a family connection to gain power and

authority for themselves. But there are a couple reasons why we know that can't be true. First of all, in John 1, we note that Andrew and John, the two younger brothers, they're the ones who first followed Jesus, but only after they had already been following John the Baptist. They were disciples of John the Baptist first, and their two older brothers were also with John the Baptist from those early days. That means that they responded from the heart to his preaching of repentance. They humbled themselves to be baptized with John's baptism. I don't think there's any spiritual ruse going on here in James and John. Not only that, they had pride in their hard-working natures. It would be so far from their minds to concoct some weasily kind of ploy to gain for themselves something they had not themselves earned. They were too proud, too self-righteous for that. These guys were the real deal: hard-working, strong men.

Still, these family connections, the family background, it had a very significant shaping influence on James and John. They're nurtured to be sons of Zebedee, wealthy businessmen from a prominent Jewish family, inheritors of their father's wealth and his influence, carrying on his reputation in the community. James is the older brother; that's why he's always named first.

John follows in the list as the younger brother. But as the oldest, James, he seemed to be the more vocal one of the two, the more prominent of the two, and that's usually the way with firstborns, especially in a Jewish household, where the older brother bears the responsibility to carry the father's name onward and own that name and own the property and manage all the estate. He had the position—James did—and the disposition to be the natural leader. All the biblical accounts portray James as that kind of a man, a man that everyone respected, a man that everybody heeded.

As the younger brother, John was maybe the more easily dismissed and looked over, standing in the shadow of his older brother. He looked up to his older brother, but they were both stamped with that family trait of boldness and strength of personality. The younger brother John, he was quieter, though. He was more contemplative. It's amazing how much more thinking you can do when your mouth is closed, right? You ever notice that? He's the disciple who, like a younger brother, he didn't mind leaning in close to Jesus, leaning back on his chest. He always wanted to be near him, right close to him. That's a younger brother thing, not characteristic of an older brother,

but it is characteristic of a younger brother, and it actually is to John's credit.

In fact, turn to Mark 9. Let me give you a text, here, just an illustration of John's nature. And as we do this, we'll transition into our second point, that nurtured here in the sons of Zebedee there was a certain explosiveness in their character and their nature. They were strong, and they didn't mind letting their voice be heard. They didn't mind making decisions and stepping out and taking the lead, and we get a hint of this in Mark chapter 9. In this account, Mark 9, shows John's solidarity with his older brother's nature on the one hand, but also shows a clear sign of John's more sensitive conscience. There's a spiritual intuitiveness about John that I think is precious. We actually see it showing up in his writing as well. But let's start reading there in verse 33. You remember the Transfiguration has just happened, and Peter, James, and John, they were specially selected to join Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration to witness the unveiling of his glory, to see Elijah and Moses with him, standing there on the mountain to hear that voice out of heaven that said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." That is, "Don't pay attention right now to

Moses and Elijah. Listen to him, to Christ." So they were there to witness that.

Inevitably, because that experience came to sinful men, there was pride and quarreling that erupted among the disciples at one point. Take a look a look at verse 33. "When they came to Capernaum, and when he [Jesus] was in the house, he asked them, 'Hey, what were you discussing on the way?' But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest." You think Jesus didn't know that? "Hey, what was that topic of conversation? Let's talk about it now around the dinner table, just have a little friendly discussion about who of you is the greatest." Jesus, here, remember in the Transfiguration, he commanded Peter, James, and John, right? "Tell no one what you've seen until after the resurrection"—Mark 9:9. But that didn't stop them whispering about it among themselves. Nor did that prevent them from pondering their privilege, from thinking about, wondering what it must mean that Jesus would specially select them and not the others, but them, for special prominence. It must mean something prominent for the future. "So which one of us three is 'the guy'?" Jesus rebuked, corrected their thinking. Look at verse 35: "He sat down, called the twelve, and he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he

must be last of all, and servant of all.'" Now being first and most prominent doesn't sound so great to these worldly-thinking men. "Last of all...servant of all": That's the one who's first. "And he took a child and put him the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me but him who sent me.'" That is, "If you receive a believer like a little child, you receive Christ, and when you receive Christ, you receive the Father. You have the whole package; the Triune God is yours."

Child-like humility, servant-hearted sacrifice, gentleness with tender-hearted believers—those are the marks of greatness in Christ's kingdom. How do you and I measure up the that? Of all the disciples, it's John, the sensitive one, the intuitive one; John immediately gets what Jesus is saying. His conscience is pricked. It's struck as he remembers an earlier violation, now, as he thinks back, of this principle that Jesus taught, that when he feels compelled at this moment to confess, to clear his conscience with Christ. Take a look at verse 38. "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.' Jesus said, 'Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work

in my name in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly I said to you, whoever gives a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.'"

Now that little vignette, there, stands out for a couple of reasons. First, Mark 9:38 is the only record we have of John speaking out on his own. And when he does speak out, it's to confess sin. It's the sign of a sensitive conscience. That's one that doesn't hide sin. He doesn't cover it over; he doesn't try to dismiss it as significant or negligible. John possessed a spiritual sensitivity, immediately grasping the significance of Jesus' teaching, and he needed to confess. Just a word of application, here. Always cultivate in yourself a sensitive conscience. The cultivation of a sensitive conscience by listening to it, by conducting a sober-minded, biblically focused self-examination, and then wherever you find sin to be quick to confess it. Train yourself that way, beloved. Train your children that. Train your grandchildren, your great grandchildren to think like that because that quality is absolutely vital and indispensable for spiritual growth. It's called having a teachable spirit.

Second, the nature of what John confessed, that's revealing into his character, isn't it? There's revealed something, here, about his nature. He and his brother had a propensity to be somewhat partisan and exclusive. "Our group and no other." You ever meet people like that? They draw that circle so tight only they can stand in it, and even if they're standing in it, it's only on one foot. They're balancing inside that tiny little circle they've created for themselves, and they exclude all others from being true Christians. James and John, they were kind of like that. They had this "us versus them" mentality, and you can actually see that, that kind of thinking, show up in John's writing, as we read earlier from John 3. You could hear that. He's a very black-and-white thinker. He expresses himself in antithetical terms.

And the problem, there, isn't with being black-and-white. That's righteous. The problem is with the standard of judgment, his failure to discern friend from foe. That's what Jesus corrected, here. "You've got to know these people. The one who is not against us is for us. The one who is practicing mighty works in my name and giving a cup of cold water in my name for my sake—they belong to me." But what's revealed, here, about John's nature is his boldness. There's a "take charge" kind of

an attitude, here. The guy is driving out demons in Jesus' name, clearly demonstrating power, but because the guy is not a part of their apostolic entourage and following in Jesus' immediate company like they were, as John confessed, "Hey, we tried to stop him because he wasn't following with us." There's a unique combination in John, isn't there, of this boldness, this courage to command this guy, shut him down, but also sensitivity.

His older brother James, he seems to be all boldness, very little sensitivity. These boys are zealous for the truth. They're loyal for Jesus Christ, and that's a very good thing. But that zeal can be a double-edged sword that bloodied friend and foe alike. Passion for truth, righteousness and justice—it produced an admirable courage in them to stand up against error, but when that zeal misfired, it was a clear example of how the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. There is no harvest of righteousness where a passion for truth is not directed by love, by the Spirit of God.

To see that illustrated, turn over to Luke 9:51. Luke 9:51. This is the, I think, clearest evidence that James and John were worthy of that nickname "Sons of Thunder." The incident recorded

in Luke 9:51-56 it follows immediately after John's confession of acting out of that partisan spirit that we just read. You can see, there, in verses 49-50, it's the same account, here. And here in Luke 9:51, there's a dramatic and marked turn in Luke's Gospel. Jesus is heading to Jerusalem to die, and Luke depicts Jesus, there, as resolute. Jesus has steeled his spine, he's set his face like flint, he's marching toward that inevitable appointment with the cross. All his disciples are with him. Read there in Luke 9:51, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up"—that is, taken up to the cross—"he set his face to go to Jerusalem, and then he sent messengers ahead of them who went and entered into a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem."

Stop there for a minute. The people, here, Samaritan people, they didn't receive Jesus and his Apostles. By this time, there would have been quite a large company following along with Jesus. Jesus and his disciples alone made 13 men, these Apostles, 13 men, but there were many other disciples following him as well, perhaps a number of women as well. And that's why Jesus sent messengers ahead of him, to set expectations, to make preparations. This is a thoughtful gesture

on Jesus' part, especially considering what is on his mind at the time, that he would stop for a moment and say, "You know what? They're going to need to know we're coming." These people, though, they rejected Jesus. They rejected his company. And this is not just a minor inconvenience for them. It's not just an attitude that says, "Boy, we've got a lot going, so it's very short notice, your showing up at our doorstep. I mean, come on! A lot of people to feed!" This is an insult. That's what's going on, here, heightened by the context of Middle Eastern culture, which sets a premium on showing hospitality to strangers, to travelers. So to refuse to show hospitality, here, it's sending a message to them. It's casting an insult, not to mention the great inconvenience of weary travelers having to go even farther to yet another city.

If you know anything about the Samaritans, you may remember that they're a mixed race of, really, apostates. God sent the Assyrians to conquer the apostate northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and the Assyrians conquered the people. They carted the people away into exile in Assyria and Babylon and those areas. Second Kings 17 tells us that the Assyrian king, Sargon II, he renamed the region as his own Assyrian province, but he renamed it Samaria, naming it for its old capital. So Sargon then

repopulated that province, taking away many of the people of the land, the unfaithful apostate Israelites, into his own land. He'd learn to regret that. But then he sent pagans back into that land, into Samaria, people he'd captured from previous conquests. So people from—it says there, 2 Kings 17:24—"people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim." These are people that were uprooted from their own homeland, where they were conquered, and then they're resettled in Samaria. They're pagan Gentiles. They worshiped false gods, a whole pantheon of gods. And they intermarried with the apostate Jews who were native to the region, those left behind by the Assyrian captivity. That's who they were. That was their stock. These Samaritans, they were a mixed race of people, and they were living in Judah's back yard. They were Jew mixed with Gentile. They practiced a syncretistic religion: Assyrian, Babylonian, and paganism mixed with Jewish apostasy. So because Samaria bordered Judah with such close proximity to the city of Jerusalem, the Samaritans were a constant nemesis to the Jewish people, and at times downright aggressive. They were the main opposition to the resettling and the rebuilding work that happened under Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophets. Samaritans were always undermining the work, writing letters back to the king, even threatening to take up arms and oppose them with

physical force, using tactics of terror and intimidation. That's the Samaritans.

So how did James and John respond to this insult from these godless Samaritans? Well, a lot like Jews. They also had their cultural prejudices. They were ethnically, culturally, religiously zealous Jews. Look at verse 54: "When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'" "We'll take care of this little problem for you. Clean up the map." What are they thinking? They obviously had no qualm of conscience about annihilating the Samaritans. "Nuke em high!" That's what they wanted to do. And they thought Jesus would be on board with that, probably even commend their zeal for God, grant them permission to execute. "Push the button, my friends." Sons of Thunder, right? And lightning.

But where did this idea come from? Is it natural cruelty? Sadism on their part? No, not at all. They believed, no doubt, that they were thinking and acting out of biblical precedent, that they were doing what was actually zealous and righteous before God. Perhaps they're thinking back to the destruction of

Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities that God had judged with fire and brimstone falling from heaven. And in addition to that sexual immorality that totally dominated those cities, in close association with that, they were also very inhospitable people. Why? Because they were self-centered. Ezekiel 16:49-50 says, "God condemned all the sins of Sodom." He didn't just focus on homosexuality; he focused on all their sin. "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom," Ezekiel says. "She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did abomination before me, so I removed them when I saw it." They saw angels coming into the square to visit Lot's house, to rescue him from the city. That last act of inhospitality on their part, the part of Sodom and Gomorrah, was just par for the course. How did God remove them? Fire from heaven.

James and John may have had that incident in mind. But perhaps they were thinking of a closer connection, one that the recent sighting of Elijah on the mount of Transfiguration reminded them of. Turn to 2 Kings 1 for a moment. 2 Kings 1—keep your finger here. Remember, James and John witnessed the Transfiguration. They watched as Jesus was transformed before their eyes, as Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, also in

glory. And they remembered that God used Elijah to judge the Baal worshipers, who lived in that very region. Many of the things that Elijah had done, they were reminded of the sights around them, of things Elijah had done. These Baal worshipers are the predecessors of the Samaritans, the ones whose faithlessness and idolatry resulted in divine judgment. And you may remember how during the reign of wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel that Elijah faced down 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in Samaria. He called down fire from heaven to consume that sacrifice, and then he took those 450 prophets out and slaughtered them with the sword.

Later, when Ahaziah, the wicked son of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, he tried at one moment to inquire about his health, about his future. He had fallen through a lattice, there in 2 Kings 1, and he tried to inquire of Baal, not God, but Baal. God confronted him for that. He sent Elijah to intercept the King's messengers and pronounce judgment—2 Kings 1:3-4. "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Now, therefore, thus says the Lord, 'You shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.'" That is, "'Your wounds are fatal.'" Kings don't like being told that. They take it kind of

personally, like a death threat. So King Ahaziah sent one of his captains along with fifty soldiers to confront Elijah, and the captain found Elijah sitting on top of a hill. And he said—2 Kings 1:9—“O, man of God, the king says, ‘Come down.’ But Elijah answered that captain of fifty, ‘If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.’ Then fire came down from heave and consumed him and his fifty.” Drastic judgment! Those men meant Elijah harm. They were coming to do him harm and take him back to answer for his death threat. God is here protecting his prophet. But the king, like kings of the time, they’re stubborn. They need to be taught two or three times, and so it happened again. King Ahaziah sent another captain, another fifty men—same result. Fire came down from heaven and consumed them. A third captain came, and he bowed before Elijah, pleaded for his life and the life of his men. He showed some humility, and God permitted Elijah to go with that captain, and Elijah gave King Ahaziah the message from the Lord directly to his face.

Perhaps that’s what James and John had in mind. Turn back to Luke 9, now. Perhaps they wanted to teach these Samaritan apostates to fear the Lord, just like Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed, and people around them had learned to fear the

Lord because of that. Or just like what happened with Elijah, and they got some reverence and respect for the great prophet because fire came down from heaven and consumed 102 men. So maybe James and John are thinking, "You know what? This is the Messiah standing in your presence. Have some respect." Right heart, right concern, a zealous concern for the jealous, for the honor and the glory of the Messiah. Perhaps they wanted to see the truth of God vindicated, this messenger of God protected, his honor defended. Look at verse 54 again: "When his disciples, James and John, saw this offense, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them, and they went on to another village." Listen, the Samaritan attitude toward Jesus, it was insulting. It was a huge offense. The Samaritan religion, it was apostate, and it always had been. Their idolatry was a stench in God's nostrils. Their cult-like arrogance and opposition toward the Jews, it was utterly deplorable. No excuse for it.

But think about some of those who oppose Christianity today. Be mindful of those when you think about this story, that any offense that you feel is real or perceived in our age and in our time and toward us personally or us as a church or us as a people. It's really pretty minimal when compared to this. But

even if we were to experience this, and we will, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. We will suffer persecution. We will suffer marginalization. We will lose jobs and lose money and lose bank accounts. I can guarantee that's going to happen, not because I'm a prophet but because I've read a book that tells me it's going to happen. We're just living through what every Christian has had to live through throughout church history. We're no different from those sheep. We're just like sheep to be slaughtered. So we shouldn't expect anything different. But listen, our attitude can never be one of anger. It can never be one of revenge. It can never be one of "Let me see us get our pound of flesh. Let those pagans pay." Not at all! None of this offense is lost on Jesus, is it? In fact, he sees the Samaritan offense in a deeper way than even his disciples do because he can see the heart. He can see the sins at the root. He can see the fruit as well. He can see everything in between. He can see what happens in the private rooms and in the public. He can see absolutely everything. Nothing is lost on Jesus.

But he had other plans for Samaria, more gracious, more redeeming plans for Samaria. Remember in verse 51—we just read it—he's heading for the cross. "He set his face to go to

Jerusalem," and that's where he would die for the sins of all of his people, including—get this—including some of these very Samaritans. It's in Acts 8:5-8 that we read that Philip the deacon went down to Samaria, and he preached Christ there. It says there that the crowds, with one accord, these Samaritan crowds, "paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him, and they saw the signs that he did for unclean spirits"—okay, there's the reason for Samaritan opposition—"unclean spirits crying out with a loud voice came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed, and so there was much joy in that city." James and John, from that small, narrow-minded vantage point, they could've never predicted Samaritan conversion. If they had had their way, there would have been no joy in the city. That's because there would have been no people. That's because there would've been no city. They would've reduced Samaria to a smoldering pile of ashes. No Gospel to Samaria because—guess what?—no Samaria.

But Jesus, he had plans to save, plans to ransom, plans to rescue. So he rebuked James and John, and they simply went on to another city. Is that a minor convenience that we could endure for the sake of the Gospel? Move on, make different travel plans? Make different arrangements? Is that okay? See people

saved? To see much joy in that city? So he rebuked James and John, went on to another city, and then he allowed the coming events in the passing of time teach James and John the lesson that they needed to learn, and that's this lesson: Never allow your zeal for truth to turn the mission field into a pile of ashes. Love people, and leave final judgment to God.

One more lesson from these two Sons of Thunder that they had to learn. Let's turn to Matthew chapter 20. Matthew chapter 20. I love this section of Scripture because it has so much to say to those of us who come into leadership in the church. Matthew 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 to 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 then crucified and 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 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 children. 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, 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. They're thinking like Catholics at this point. How would he refuse a request from his mother? Jesus knows, here, though, he knows the source of his 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 pride 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 that. They're just thankful they got there first. They're thankful they had a shrewd plan, a business approach, to get 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 will 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, or whatever it is in the list, here: 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 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 is 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 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 the reality that they could never predict as their nurture and their nature are here bridled; they're here submitted into the service of 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 speak 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 8:15, it says that "When the apostles at Jerusalem"—and remember James is there; he's one of the key men, John's brother; he's one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church— "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, as we already mentioned, 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. Paul called him 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 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. He seemed to have such an incredible future before him. Certainly, this had to be a shock to the Apostles,

all of whom would have foreseen great things in James' future. 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. It also shows us in James being cut down early, 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 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. You're 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 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 suffering, his own children and spiritual grandchildren suffering difficult trials, chased by a hostile empire, by angry Jews. He had to watch them suffer. He even had to watch some defect, turn away from the truth. It 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 that outlived 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 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, there's no greater joy 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 some time 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 this 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 95, 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 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 and 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 Father's 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 at 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 whom you turned into prominent and passionate and 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.