

“Your Humble Servant”

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Text: Mark 10:35-45

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It seems as if every child learns the word. It may be uttered for the first time on the playground, or at home, or in the family car. I don't remember being taught the word – I must have absorbed it from my brothers and sisters through osmosis. It is the word that has explicit power – when this word is released from the lips, it immediately commands the attention of anyone in earshot. The speaker of that word sets the tone – the agenda – for what is to follow. What's the word?

The word is “dibs.” “DIBS” reserves or declares full or partial ownership of a community resource. DIBS is almost always called or yelled rather than spoken. Calling “dibs” is typically done by yelling “Dibs on \_\_\_\_\_.” “Dibs on the last piece of cake.” “Dibs on the couch.” “Dibs on the TV.” Or in my family it was usually “Dibs on the window” when we were piling into the station wagon. The DIBS system operates completely on a first-come, first-serve basis, so if you're challenged after having said DIBS, the response is normally, “Sorry, I called it.”

Now DIBS etiquette dictates that DIBS can only be used in the present time. It's not permissible to call “dibs” on something occurring in the future. For instance, when planning to leave on a trip the next day, a call of “dibs” on the front seat in the car tomorrow would normally be rejected.

The word “dibs” is thought to originate from dibstones – an ancient game played with pebbles, sheep knuckles, and later jacks. It is a mystery how a word for a game in Britain turned into an American expression claiming priority. In the United Kingdom and Ireland – “bagsy” or “bags” is used to the same effect as in “I'll bag the best seats.”

According to WIKIPEDIA, there's a variation to dibs. “No dibs” or “dibs out” is usually called out when an undesirable chore or action is brought up. Convention holds that while calling “no dibs” one must place a finger to their nose. The last person to call “No dibs” is then required to perform the action or chore. There's also “Erasies/No Erasies.” Erasies can be called when one dibs a desirable object. The object is then back in play. The first to say “Dibs on \_\_\_\_\_, no erasies” gets the object for good until “Dibs out” is called by that person. If “No erasies” is not called after dibsing an object, any other person may say “erasies” to cancel out the dibs and dibs the object themselves. Were you aware of all the nuances to dibs?

James and John know how to play “Dibs.” In today's text they call dibs on the positions of honor. They both yell “Shotgun,” laying claim not to the passenger seat in the car, but to the seats at the right hand and left hand of the Messiah. At this point in the gospel of Mark, Jesus has for the third time, told the disciples that the Son of Man will be arrested and suffer and be killed, and for the third time, the disciples immediately turn the conversation to themselves. Having just heard Jesus' prediction about His approaching death, James and John start lining up for the best seats in the hereafter. “Let us sit at your right hand and your left hand, in your glory.” It may be helpful to remind ourselves that the traditional Jewish messiah was to arrive on that last day in glory and power, judging all and ruling all. Those who had remained loyal and righteous in the eyes of the Messiah expected to receive honorable recognition for their faithful behavior. A great and powerful messiah surrounded by his great distinguished disciples was the vision James and John had nurtured all their lives – it was the expected way things would proceed. Jesus asks the two men whether they will be able to drink the cup or be baptized with the baptism that He himself will experience. “Sure, Jesus, no problem. We are able.” Jesus tells them, “You can join my party, but I can't let you have dibs on the best seats in the house. That's God's call.”

In verse 41, Mark stops singling out James and John as the most wrongheaded disciples, and allows the other ten to put on an equally ridiculous display. We know from Jesus' response to all the bickering that suddenly breaks out that the other disciples are arguing against James and John having dibs on the most honored places in eternity – not that they were scolding the two brothers for the inappropriateness of their question.

Confronted with their incomprehension, Jesus once again attempts to explain just what true discipleship means. Jesus appeals to His followers to sense the essence of their uniqueness by contrasting them with Gentiles. Gentile rulers, or great ones, are described as tyrants. The disciples of Jesus who wish to

be “great” must consign themselves to being “servants.” The very highest status, in fact, will be accorded one who becomes slave of all. It is the Son of Man, not Gentile rulers, that the disciples are to emulate – living not to “be served” but to serve. Forget about “upward mobility,” guys. Instead we’re talking about “outward mobility,” serving others. When you consider serving others, or our call to be servants for Christ, what comes to mind?

In his book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster does a great job of unpacking the discipline of service. He draws a distinction between self-righteous service and true service. Self righteous service comes through human effort and is impressed with the big deal. It requires external rewards and seeks human applause. True Christian service comes from a relationship with God and finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large service. While it doesn’t fear the lights and blare of attention, it doesn’t seek them out either.

Self righteous service is highly concerned about results. It waits to see if the person served will reciprocate in kind. Indeed, it picks and chooses whom to serve. True service, on the other hand, delights only in the service – it can serve enemies as freely as friends and doesn’t calculate results.

Self righteous service, Foster suggests, is affected by moods and whims. “I can serve only when I feel like serving.” True service knows that the ministry of service is more important than how an individual happens to feel about it on any given day. While self righteous service centers on the glorification of the individual and thereby fractures community, true service quietly cares for the needs of others and builds community.

Where do we see ourselves in this distinction? Foster is helpful in suggesting ways in which we can be engaged in true service. He says that there is the service of hiddenness – finding ways behind the scenes to serve others. Hidden anonymous ministries affects even people who know nothing of them. There is the service of small things. Large tasks require great sacrifice for a moment, small things require constant sacrifice.

- There is the service of guarding the reputation of others.
- There is the service of being served.
- There is the service of common courtesy.
- There is the service of hospitality.
- There is the service of listening.
- There is the service of bearing the burdens of each other.
- There is the service of sharing the word of life with one another.

You know Jesus didn’t give up on James or John or the other ten – He helped them see greatness and service in a different light. With some give and take, Jesus paraded before them the symbols of the life of a servant – the cup, the baptism, and the cross. Nowhere among those symbols is there anything about gaining personal power or prestige or permission to call “dibs” on the right and left sides of Jesus.

As preacher William Kincaid wrote:

Just as Jesus encouraged his disciples to grow in their understanding, we are invited to rethink and grow in our own understanding of what it means to serve. In a “what’s in it for me” culture, we are invited to explore ways we can make a difference in the lives of others. In a time when we are content to cast off anyone who does not agree with us, we are encouraged to consider what kind of genuine debate and lasting reconciliation is possible among these opposing factions. In an environment which encourages us to do our own thing, we are pushed to consider if there is something in particular God is calling us to do with our talents in the places where we live and work and play and worship. In an atmosphere that encourages us to accumulate more things than we could ever appreciate or use, we are persuaded to see if there is anything in our lives hindering our relationship to Jesus Christ. And in a society based on fame and glory, one that measures people’s importance by how close they are to the spotlight, we are being called to a quieter, more meaningful life of good and simple deeds of service to those with whom we share this church and this city and this planet.

Listen as a man describes his experience in an unfamiliar church:

On a recent vacation, our family walked into a church a little early for the 11 o'clock Sunday morning worship service. We chose it for three reasons:

1. It was the church closest to our hotel.
2. It looked small and friendly.
3. Best of all . . . I was sure I didn't know anybody there.

The crowd was small . . . and they were all gathered at the front of the building, sitting quietly. They seemed to be praying, so the four of us took a seat in the back pew and waited. If we were early, there was no reason to disturb their pre-service ritual.

Then, promptly at 11:00, the meeting in the front dispersed. The people got to their feet and walked up the aisle toward us. We smiled . . . and so did they . . . all the way out the door, leaving us alone in the sanctuary. We looked around, studied the architecture of the building, glanced through the hymnal, and finally studied each other's puzzled faces.

Our 12-year-old cleared her throat knowingly at me, and I got the message: "Find out what's going on . . . and soon, please. We're ready for lunch if nothing is happening here!"

"Be the man in charge," I thought, getting out of my seat and moving quickly toward the foyer.

The big button that said "Usher" was my first clue that I was talking to the right man. I introduced myself as a tourist, and he smiled the usual "Gospel Grin" associated with his leadership position, and welcomed me to the town and his church.

After the appropriate thanks, I asked, "When does your worship service begin?" He smiled again and said, "Our worship begins at 10:00 a.m. Our service begins as we leave."

O God, we call "Dibs" on being your servants. Bring us someone today and every day, whom we can serve in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.