

To Serve or To Be Served
Matthew 20:20-28
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Following Jesus' prediction to His disciples (for the third time) that He will be delivered to the chief priests in Jerusalem to be killed and would rise again the third day, we find the story of the mother of James and John asking Jesus for preference for her sons in the coming kingdom. The results in the ten others becoming indignant with the two brothers.

Along the very journey that would culminate in the crucifixion, the disciples were more concerned with their own sake above this prediction that Jesus had made. Luke 18:34 states what this question infers, that *"the disciples understood none of these things, and the meaning of this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said."* They are oblivious to the circumstances that were about to occur.

Yet Luke does not include this account of the mother's request on behalf of her sons, nor any of the words of Jesus in response. Mark 10:35-45 does include it, but omits the involvement of the mother of James and John. That a story such as this, which describes the apostles of the church in such a negative way, is included in two of the Gospels is a testimony of the integrity of the Scripture.

In contrast to other human historical literature, the Bible does not hesitate to describe what actually occurred, even when it puts its key figures in a negative light. The early church did not scrub these deficiencies from the biblical record, but made a great effort to propagate them through a great many handwritten copies. This testifies to the confidence we can have in the written word of God.

Place in the kingdom (20:20-23)

Matthew 20:20-21 describes the mother of James and John as approaching Jesus with the request that her two sons would be chosen to sit at Jesus' right and left in the coming kingdom. However, Mark 10:35-37 describes James and John as asking for this privilege themselves.

This apparent discrepancy can be resolved by observing a few important details. First, Matthew describes James and John as accompanying their mother with her request, *"the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him."* Therefore, all three of them participated in the request, with the mother acting as their representative.

Also, the other disciples *“became indignant with the two brothers.”* The other ten viewed James and John as being culpable in this request. Also, Jesus did not only address the mother but all three of them in verse 23, *“He said to them...”*

When we compare Matthew and Mark’s accounts of the women who went to the tomb of Jesus early on Sunday morning, we find that the woman the Matthew refers to as the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Matthew 27:56) is referred to by the name Salome in Mark 15:40 (cf. Mark 16:1). Furthermore, when we compare the names of these women in Matthew 27:56 and Mark 15:40 with the list of women in John 19:25, we find that if we assume all three are referring to the same group, then it become very likely that the mother of the sons of Zebedee is also the sister of the mother of Jesus.

With these deductions, it would be understandable that the mother of the sons of Zebedee would approach Jesus, since she would be the aunt of Jesus on His mother’s side. While this is not certain, it does explain the mother’s involvement in this matter with Jesus. Nevertheless, the two brothers were actively engaged in this request also.

The mother makes the request by *“bowing down,”* which could be interpreted as either worship or deep respect for an authority figure. If she is indeed the aunt of Jesus, this would be a significant act of recognition of His authority. Her request for her sons to *“sit one on Your right and one on your left”* indicates positions of prestige due to close proximity to Christ. In such positions, subjects of a king would typically be afforded power to act on behalf of the king.

Jesus Himself had just spoken of Himself sitting *“on His glorious throne,” with the twelve also sitting “upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel”* (Matthew 19:28). Therefore, this request is founded upon these words. The mother and her sons recognize the coming kingdom, referred to as *“in Your glory”* in Mark 10:37. However, their view of this coming kingdom was that it would come soon, while Jesus had just told them of what was quickly approaching, *“we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up”* (Matthew 20:18-19).

That this request would follow this revelation of Christ’s death is remarkable in that they not only miss the significance of the cross in redemption, but they are more concerned with their own place in the coming kingdom, rather than the events that were about to unfold. This hasty, self-oriented request is a testament to how confused the disciples were about Christ’s atonement for sin.

Jesus responded by addressing their confusion, “*you do not know what you are asking.*” He also responded to this request by speaking about the coming suffering. This is what was meant by the metaphor of “*the cup that I am about to drink.*” The Old Testament uses the word “cup” to refer to judgment or retribution (cf. Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17-18; Jeremiah 25:15-28; Ezekiel 23:31-34). It is used for suffering in Lamentations 4:21-22, “*But the cup will come around to you as well, You will become drunk and make yourself naked. The punishment of your iniquity has been completed, O daughter of Zion; He will exile you no longer. But He will punish your iniquity, O daughter of Edom; He will expose your sins!*”

Clearly Jesus used the imagery of the cup for His impending suffering and sacrifice for the sin of man, as seen by the words “*that I am about to drink.*” James and John respond affirmatively to Him by declaring their willingness to drink this cup. However, their declaration is quite brazen since they so quickly overlooked Jesus’ statement about His death and their understanding of this suffering was no more clear than their understanding of the kingdom.

Jesus informs them that they will suffer with Him, “*My cup you shall drink.*” This suffering will await the coming of the Holy Spirit, when Acts 4:1-22 describes the arrest of John and Acts 5:17-42 the arrest of all the apostles. Like Jesus, James and John were flogged (Acts 5:40) and the same king that was involved in the death of Christ, Herod Antipas, would order James to be put to death with a sword (Acts 12:1-2). John wrote the Book of Revelation suffering on Patmos “*because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus*” (Revelation 1:9).

Mark’s Gospel adds to the question of whether they are able to drink the cup with, “*or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*” This is Jesus’ restatement of the same concept of their willingness to follow His path. Later Greek manuscripts assimilate this phrase into Matthew’s Gospel, which became translated in the King James Version.

James and John would endure His sufferings, not because of their statement of willingness, but because of God’s sovereign empowerment of them in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus acknowledged their question but did not answer it. He did not answer it because it was His Father’s prerogative alone to determine who would have the privileged position in the coming kingdom. According to Jesus, this place was “*not Mine to give,*” making it clear that He did not have total authority Himself but only what was given by the Father to Him (cf. Matthew 11:27). These positions had been already prepared by the Father, and it was not for the Son to change what had already been determined.

Greatness in the kingdom (20:24-27)

The immediate result of this bold request by the two disciples was that the remaining ten disciples *“became indignant with the two brothers.”* Mark’s Gospel notes that this indignation was a feeling that they had, so there is no direct evidence that this request created an actual conflict. But certainly, what they asked produced difficulties among the group, and especially since all ten became indignant, which suggests some degree of collusion.

While the two disciples instigated this tension among them, the other ten were not absolved since they would become indignant because of their desire for such privilege themselves. They too had overlooked the words of Jesus about His coming suffering and death and were caught up in their own self-interest, ambition and jealousy also. The other ten disciples needed the same exhortation from Jesus that James and John did. *“You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel”* (James 4:2).

Because Jesus knew how they felt, He called them to Himself. He began by contrasting the function of governments of the world with the kingdom of God. Among earthly governments, the leaders have a position of power, *“the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them.”* The very purpose of their position is to rule over the Gentiles.

This ruling was stated by Jesus in a negative way, *“lord it over them.”* However, this ought not to be understood as some specific abuse of power but it was simply a description of how the rulers of the world function. “Lord it over them” was synonymous with the following phrase *“exercise authority.”* This is placed in contrast to how the disciples ought to act, *“it is not this way among you.”*

Rulers of this world, particularly in the first century, plotted their ascent into positions of authority in order to gain power and status. While the disciples were not planning betrayal and murder that was the practice of the day, they were seeking for their own interest in their position in the kingdom. Yet these positions were not only not able to be ascended to, they rather were prepared by the Father.

The most significant difference between the disciples and the rulers of this world involves the exercise of authority. In this difference, Jesus addresses the distinction of serving, *“whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.”* If the disciples were placed in positions of authority in the kingdom, it would be for the purpose of service to others.

The world views those in positions of power and authority as “*great men.*” But this is not greatness in the view of our Lord. True greatness is derived from service, “*but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.*” To serve others is to serve God, who determines greatness.

The disciples' desire to advance to the right and left of Christ in the kingdom did not align with the path to greatest as being one of service. Greatness in the kingdom of God is not something that can be lobbied for, and there is no strategy that can produce this greatness other than serving others for the Lord's sake. It is ironic that the KJV translates the word “servant” as “minister,” whereas the office of minister today connotes power and authority, in both the church and in government.

This concept of humble service is emphasized by Matthew 20:27, “*whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.*” This Greek word for slave (DOULOS) is a stronger word for subservience than the word “servant” (DIAKONOS) in verse 26. This references the full nature of the humility required of those who will be great in the kingdom of God.

To be first in the kingdom is to place yourself last. This statement reflects Matthew 20:16, “*so the last shall be first, and the first last.*” This shows the values of our Lord, who does not view things from the wisdom of men but from the wisdom of God. Those who demand positions of authority are therefore inconsistent with this principle.

Example of the kingdom (20:28)

Jesus shows Himself as the ultimate example of selfless service, “*just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*” Yet this may appear to be a difficult example to understand since His disciples cannot follow this, for only Jesus was able “*to give His life a ransom for many.*”

However, Jesus can be the example of service even when His manner of service was unique to Him. Paul used Christ as the example for why we should “*have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men*” (Philippians 2:5-7). We did not exist in the form of God and did not empty ourselves, but we can adopt the attitude of Jesus, who did empty Himself.

Peter also used the example of Christ to exhort us to endure suffering patiently, *“since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness”* (1 Peter 2:21-24). Christ’s atoning sacrifice is an example to us of how we ought to live in service to God.

Christ spoke these words with the assumption that He had every right to come to be served as *“the Son of Man,”* but chose to serve mankind. The phrase *“the Son of Man did not come”* implies the preexistence of Jesus prior to His birth on earth. He came to earth as God’s atoning sacrifice for the sin of man. Jesus once again predicts His coming death in that He will give His life (cf. Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

The phrase *“to give His life a ransom for many”* speaks to His atonement for man’s sin. The Greek word for “ransom” (LYTRON) was typically used for the purchase price for slaves. It is in this sense that we were delivered from slavery to sin, *“For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness”* (Romans 6:20). 1 Peter 1:18-19 also references this deliverance that Christ death bought, *“you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.”*

Matthew 20:28 has been used to support the doctrine of limited atonement, which holds that Christ’s death was only for the elect, not for all men. While one could imply that the word *“many”* means that Jesus did not die for “all,” this is not necessarily true. The Bible actually uses the term “many” to mean “all,” as is seen most clearly in Romans 5:15, *“by the transgression of the one the many died,”* and Romans 5:19, *“through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.”*

While the phrase “many” can hold a meaning of “not all,” it also is a figure of speech to mean all in a way that emphasizes the numerous nature of the subjects, in contrast to not a few. These words of Jesus reflect Isaiah 53:11-12, *“My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.”*

There are many verses that teach Christ's death was for all people:

- Romans 5:6: *"Christ died for the ungodly"*
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-15: *"One died for all therefore all died"*
- Hebrews 2:9: *"that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone"*
- 1 Timothy 2:6 *"who gave Himself as a ransom for all"*
- Isaiah 53:6: *"All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."*
- Romans 5:18: *"So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."*
- 1 Timothy 4:10: *"we have fixed our hope on the loving God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers."*
- 1 John 2:2: *"and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."*
- 2 Peter 2:1: *"there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves."*

Of course, only the elect of God will benefit from Christ's death on their behalf and enter into salvation and the kingdom of God (cf. John 3:16). Because the One died, the many will be blessed with deliverance from sin. This verse is not only another prediction by Christ of His death, but it is the first time that He tells His disciples the purpose for His death.

Conclusion

Because Christ is our example in serving us, we must in humility serve others. This simple truth is in contrast to the clamoring for position by the disciples. This is the way of the world, which regards meekness as weakness. If we want to be great in the kingdom of God, we must in humility become the servant of all.

"Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:12).