

Sunday, June 6, 2025: Kingdom Greatness, Matthew 20:20–28

Matthew 20:20–28

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons approached him with her sons. She knelt down to ask him for something. "What do you want?" he asked her. "Promise," she said to him, "that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right and the other on your left, in your kingdom." Jesus answered, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" "We are able," they said to him. He told them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right and left is not mine to give; instead, it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." When the ten disciples heard this, they became indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them over and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Introduction:

Jesus is passing through Jericho, on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus has just predicted his death and resurrection.

Based on parallel passages in the other gospels we can assume that this would be Thursday – eight days before the crucifixion. The next chapter is Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, and five days later he will be crucified.

1. Upside down kingdom

Often, God's principles, are contradictory to our human understanding and reasoning:

Isaiah 55:9 "For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Believers are called to live Kingdom down, not culture up. We look at what the Bible has to say, what God values, what God blessed, what God wants for us and for the world, and we build our lives on that.

In Matthew, we have seen ideas of heavenly rewards and the first being last. It serves to answer the question: What does it mean to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven? (Ref: Mark 9:33–35, Luke 22:24–27)

Culture says the one being served is the greater. Culture is not our model, Jesus is, and Jesus came to serve.

2. The Request

The mother of Zebedee's sons approached Jesus with her sons and asks that "that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right and the other on your left, in your kingdom."

James and John, with Peter, were already Jesus' inner circle. Those three disciples were the closest in relationship and proximity to Jesus among the twelve. Jesus already promised in Matthew 19, that the disciples would sit on twelve thrones.

3. What does Jesus think of the request and how does He respond?

The theme of the cup of suffering is laced throughout the Old Testament. Jesus has talked about the suffering he would face in the previous verses.

They might not have known what they were asking – the full extent of what they were signing up for.

Jesus affirms them, even though they would desert him at the crucifixion. Ultimately, they would drink the cup – they would participate in his sufferings – but here Jesus tells them – they are not going to *earn* their place in the Kingdom – that has been prepared by the Father.

None of us are able to earn our place in the Kingdom. It is undeserved grace.

4. The other disciple's response and Jesus' teaching point:

The other disciples are predictably unhappy with James and John. Jesus uses this opportunity to tell the disciples what it looks like to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus points out that the values of our culture, our human understanding of how to wield authority, does not apply to us as followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus flips human values upside down. Authority and greatness as a follower of Jesus is diametrically opposed to what our world is accustomed to.

RT France puts it this way, "Self-importance, the desire to be noticed and respected, the ambition to make one's mark and to impose one's will on others, this is the desire of the rat-race, not of the Kingdom of God."

John 13:13–15 (CSB)

You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are speaking rightly, since that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you.

Jesus provides this example to his disciples to show that they are to be servants of one another.

5. Jesus is the Perfect Fulfillment of Servanthood

Matthew 20:28 (CSB)

just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

While our acts of service and sacrifice pale in comparison to that which Jesus bore on the cross, we are called to follow, and our motivation is to be the same. Not to be served but to serve. To know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and share in his sufferings.

6. Outcome for James and John:

James and John, though they deserted him at the crucifixion, would eventually drink that cup. They would suffer for the name of Jesus Christ. James would be martyred at the hands of King Herod, and John faced death when he was boiled in oil during a wave of persecution in Rome. After miraculously surviving that encounter, he was exiled to the mines on the island of Patmos (Acts 12:1–2, Revelation 1:9)

7. For us:

We are all called to missions. We are living in a lost country. We are living in a mission field, and the harvest is plentiful. What would it take to reach people in your sphere of influence?

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, Romans 10:13–15: But how can they call on him if they have not believed? How can they believe in him if they have never heard? How can they hear if no one tells them? Who will tell them unless

they are sent? We cannot become about being served rather than serving. Why do we serve? Because he first served us!
Not because we can earn anything, but because of what he did for us.

Jesus took on the punishment for all of our sin. All of it. Past, present, future. The punishment that brought us peace was on *him*.

We are saved through Christ to serve.

Questions:

1. "True gospel-humility means I stop connecting every experience, every conversation, with myself. In fact, I stop thinking about myself." Tim Keller

Discuss this quote, what stands out to you most? Do you see the gospel in this quote or not? Explain.

2. In our scripture passage today, what strikes you most about the mother's request? Why do you think that the other ten disciples were indignant by this (v. 24)? Have you ever been the one requesting a privilege? Have you ever been the one indignant at someone else who requested a privilege?

3. Why do you think that all of us are so eager to "lord over" and to "exercise authority over" others, yet so indignant at the authority that others have over us (v. 25)? Why is pride so pervasive in our culture? Do you ever find yourself placing your self-worth in something other than Christ? How do we guard against this?

4. Why do you think Jesus tells them that they do not know what they are asking (v. 22)? What does Jesus mean when he asks them whether they are able to drink from the cup that Jesus drinks (v. 22)? How would you have responded to this question? Has your answer evolved over the journey of your walk with Christ?

5. Bonus question: We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19

Do we? Do we love our neighbors and people around us? How would you say you do this, what are the outward signs that someone looking in would identify/point to? Do you struggle with this (showing love to others)– why/what hinders or prevents you from showing love to others?