

Me First! 8-28-05

Matthew 20:17-28 (NIV)

¹⁷Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

²⁰Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹"What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." ²²"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. ²³Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." ²⁴When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

We have come to the week preceding the crucifixion. Jesus is about to leave Jericho and walk that narrow trail up to Jerusalem. He spoke of this path in the story of the good Samaritan. The other Gospel writers add some interesting details and emotion that give us the atmosphere. Mark wrote that the disciples were astonished and the other followers were afraid. (Mark 10:32) That is because they know that the religious establishment is intent on murdering Jesus. (John 11:53) They realized that they were following Jesus into a confrontation. They seemed to be such a small powerless band compared to the hierarchy and power of those who opposed Jesus.

In John 15, Jesus said that everything He learned from the Father He passed on to them because they were friends. (John 15:15) His great shepherd heart wanted to prepare them for what He knew was coming. Even though they would not fully grasp it, soon they would recall that He had predicted exactly what would happen. (Luke 24:6-8)

¹⁷Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death... He predicted a betrayal. He named the group that He would be betrayed to, and that they would condemn Him to death. This was so contrary to the accepted view of what a Messiah would do. It is obvious that the disciples didn't receive what Jesus was saying. They expected this showdown to result in Jesus being crowned king and High Priest. They expected to go from being insignificant men to the highest, most

Commented [notes1]: ³² They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him.
Mark 10:32 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: ⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life.
John 11:53 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.
John 15:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee:

⁷ "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again."

⁸ Then they remembered his words.
Luke 24:6-8 (NIV)

respected men in the nation. It would be like volunteering for a Presidential candidate that was at the bottom in the polls, and yet, one who you believed couldn't lose. Imagine the lofty appointment waiting you as a reward when he does come to power. But if that candidate told you he would be assassinated that week, you would probably blow it off as unfounded fear in much the same way the disciples did. After all, they'd seen Him raise the dead and feed the masses. (Matthew 9:18; Matthew 14:19-21) He walked on water and stilled raging storms. (Mark 4:39) How could He lose this confrontation?

Jesus went on to say ¹⁹*and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!*" If it was hard to imagine the religious establishment condemning Him to death, it would be even harder to envision the Romans flogging and crucifying Him. And what was that little tag line He threw on? "Raised to life!" As many times as Jesus told them, they just never hung on to His words. What a lesson for us! (Hebrews 2:1)

We had better hang on to the words of Christ. It is not that we can't intellectually understand what is said; it is that our pride hinders us from accepting what is said. It was the disciples' lust for power because of pride that kept them from receiving what Jesus was saying. There are so many voices that promise things contrary to the Word of God. We need to be aware that we are in a battle (Ephesians 6:12) and that it will sometimes look as though we are defeated. We need to hear the warnings for the same reason the disciples needed to hear them. It prepares us for the reality we are to face. It doesn't make it easier, but it does help us to know that we are in God's hands through the trials. (Isaiah 40:11) It does help us to know that God is still on the throne and that these things are ultimately for our good. (Romans 8:28)

Can we also cling to the promise of life on the other side? That seemed to be the most difficult concept for them to grasp. None of them were waiting at the tomb the next Sunday morning. On the other side of our trials, will we be looking up, expecting the blessing of God? Our unscriptural expectations and ungodly mindset keep us in fear and uncertainty just like it did in the lives of the disciples. Listen to the Word in humility and believe. He tells us of the difficulties to prepare us. He tells us of the final victory to give us hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

²⁰*Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.* ²¹*"What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."* Kings of that day expressed how great they were by being able to grant the most demanding requests. Remember Herod with his stepdaughter and the promise to give her whatever she asked up to half his kingdom? (Mark 6:23) The mother of James and John, who some believe was Jesus' aunt, tried to play on this custom. It causes one to wonder if James and John already realized their request was less than honorable and could only be obtained by trickery. If they truly understood what they were requesting, then they were saying that they were the two greatest saints in all history.

Commented [notes5]: ¹⁸ While he was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live."
Matthew 9:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.
Matthew 14:19-21 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.
Mark 4:39 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: ¹ We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.
Hebrews 2:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.
Ephesians 6:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.
Isaiah 40:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: ²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.
Romans 8:28 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage each other with these words.
1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: ²³ And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."
Mark 6:23 (NIV)

Jesus had tried to correct their idea of greatness in a previous chapter when He set a child in their midst and said they needed the humility of this child to even enter the Kingdom. (Matthew 18:3) Last week we saw that everyone that enters the Kingdom receives that wonderful gift of grace, the promised transformation that we may live in the presence of God. That is the culmination of our salvation. (1 John 3:2) But they don't seem to have really grasped what Jesus was saying about greatness. Perhaps it was Jesus' response to Peter's question about what they would have for leaving all to follow Him that inspired James and John to get their mother to make the request. Jesus said the disciples would sit on thrones judging Israel. Of course, Jesus was speaking of another day, but the disciples may have interpreted it to mean in this lifetime. James and John wanted appointments to the highest positions. This shows that at this point in time they had missed much of what Jesus was teaching. Let's make sure we don't miss it!

Commented [notes14]: ³ And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ² Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 1 John 3:2 (NIV)

Aren't mom's great? They always want the best for their children. She wanted her sons to have the big thrones. "My boys deserve the big thrones, the other 10 can have the little thrones." Of course she would be more important and honored in that society if she was the mother of the two of the most important men. Oh, how we miss the point! Jesus is speaking of suffering and death, and she desires 1st and 2nd positions for her sons. Jesus was speaking of humility and service, and they are jockeying for the grandest titles. How it must break His heart when we ignore what He says and follow our old nature! Pride is a form of insanity. It ignores God's greatness and man's depravity to our own detriment. (Psalm 10:4)

Commented [notes16]: ⁴ In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God. Psalms 10:4 (NIV)

²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. Jesus is going to drink a cup of suffering and judgment. Those who would follow closely would share in His suffering. (Colossians 1:24) Did they know what they were asking? I really don't think so. Do any of us? Jesus' way of seeing the world is so radically different that it takes us a lifetime of living in the Word and walking in the Spirit to get this radically different viewpoint, the perspective of heaven. I can never forget the Bible College students in India that knew they were going to return to their home state or country to face persecution and even death. Could they drink the cup? We don't know until we stand face to face with it. Then we find out. We will each be handed that cup as we follow our Lord. Will we recognize it? Will we run from it or receive it? (1 Peter 4:13)

Commented [notes17]: ²⁴ Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. Colossians 1:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:13 (NIV)

Later, Jesus would tell Peter that he would deny Him. Peter answered, "Never!" (Matthew 26:33-35) Peter said he could drink the cup, but at that time he couldn't. Many a person has said they could, only to find when faced with pain and rejection that they were not able. Humility says, "With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26) It never says, "I can!" That is the voice of pride.

Commented [notes19]: ³³ Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. ³⁴ Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. ³⁵ Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples. Matthew 26:33-35 (KJV)

²³ Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." Jesus looked into the future and saw the suffering James and John would endure for Jesus. James would be the first Apostle to be martyred. (Acts 2:12) John would be boiled in oil and sent into exile to a labor colony. Though

Commented [notes20]: ²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Matthew 19:26 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. Acts 12:2 (NIV)

they weren't ready at the time, they would one-day share in Christ's suffering. Yet, those thrones were up to God the Father to choose.

Here again we have a glimpse of what Paul wrote of in Philippians 2. Jesus emptied Himself to live as a man. (Philippians 2:6-8) He set aside some of His ability so that He could live as our example. He trusted in the sovereignty of God. Instead of exerting His will as a man, He acquiesced to the Father. (Luke 22:42) He exemplified humility.

²⁴When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

Was this righteous indignation? Had they learned their lesson after arguing on the way from Caesarea Philippi about who would be greatest? (Mark 9:34) Nope! They will have the same argument at the Last Supper. (Luke 22:24) Can you believe it? I can. Because without the Holy Spirit every one of us would be doing the same thing. It is so sad, but that is the condition of man, jockeying for position and power so we can have our way. If we only knew how revolting our selfishness is to God! They were indignant that they didn't make the request first. How we need the Holy Spirit to dominate our thought life and desires! (Ephesians 2:3)

²⁵Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. The world's way is not to be our way! We model church government after worldly corporations and organizations. We vote to see who is most popular for a position. That is not the way of the Kingdom; it is the way of the world. To be in charge and get others to do your bidding is the world's way. It reeks of pride and arrogance. May it never be so with us.

It will always be a temptation to let the powerful and self-assured lead us about. It is actually easier and sometimes appears to be more productive. They know where they are going. They can produce visible results. They just tell us what to do and we do it. We can even take pride in our proud leaders. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- The church needs humble shepherds that lead by example and call others to follow. They won't always know where they are going, like Abraham, they just know that God is leading. They can't always point to numerical and even spiritual growth because they simply want to be faithful and trust God for those things in His will and His time.

Then Jesus made one of the key theological statements about why He came to earth as a man. ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." He showed us what it means to be a great leader in the eyes of God. He humbled Himself and became completely dependent on the Father. He came not to be served but to serve. Jesus expressed the greatness of God by serving others. He was not wrapped up in finding Himself, in loving Himself, in being fulfilled, or being great. He was wrapped up in being obedient to God and laying down His life in service. His own description of why He came was to serve.

Commented [notes22]: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!
Philippians 2:6-8 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."
Luke 22:42 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.
Mark 9:34 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: ²⁴ Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.
Luke 22:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes26]: ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.
Ephesians 2:3 (NIV)

In those last few words we see the culmination of that service. He was giving His own life as a ransom for many. You see, Satan had a right to our souls because of our rebellion against God. We were his. He took great delight in the destruction he could wreak upon our lives. He would only be forced to relinquish that privilege if someone paid the ransom to God. What was the ransom? Justice had to be served. The wages of sin is death, and the life of the flesh is in the blood. But a soul that sins could not pay for another. It had to be the lifeblood of the innocent. God the Son came to give His life's blood a ransom for many. He loves you that much.

If He paid such a precious price, shouldn't we live in the fullness of the freedom He purchased? Living in the fullness of that freedom is living a life of service. Are you grateful for the price He paid for your freedom? Then, live in that freedom by serving God and others. Follow His example of living to serve and not to be served.

I'm so encouraged by some of my family members. When we were on vacation they served those who served us. They made their jobs easier; they encouraged and uplifted them. They did it to such an extent that the old pilot of the ship that some described as vulgar, hugged us all good-bye.

We always have opportunities to serve. I'm blessed that I can be a pastor in a church where many want to serve others, and not to be served. So much of the remodel was done with the help of those who wanted to serve. People come into the church on their free day and ask what they can do to serve. You are following Jesus' example in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us keep at it in an increasing way. You value the ransom paid for your soul and you want to live in the fullness of that freedom. Free to live for others and not self. Free to be a bond-servant of Jesus Christ.

James and John hadn't yet realized what Jesus had said earlier. To follow Jesus you MUST take up your cross and follow Him. If you lose your life you will find it. They were still trying to save their lives. (1 John 2:6) When you see others acting like that, remember, the disciples did it too. Pray for them. They just haven't seen it yet. Pray the Holy Spirit will fill us so that every time we act in selfishness we will feel the sting of conviction. Pray that we will be filled to overflowing so that we can live a life of love. Pray that we can live in the freedom of that ransom paid for us. The world needs to see us acting like Christ before they will listen to the message of Christ's salvation. If we really believe the greatest is the servant of all, our lives will demonstrate it. We will follow the example of our Savior who came not to be served but to serve. Is that greatness to you?