

Text: Matthew 20:20-28

Title: A Mom's Desire

Truth: Greatness is a reward for humble service.

Date/Location: July 6, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

In chapter 18, we saw that the disciples asked Jesus who would be the greatest person in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Lord used the object lesson of a little child to show who would even *enter* the Kingdom of Heaven. And those who are humble before God like a little child in humility, these ones will be great.

In chapter 20, the general topic comes up again, but the Lord uses a different notion to teach the disciples what greatness looks like.

I. The Request of a Mom, v. 20-21

A. Mark 10:35 says that James and John ask the question. Here, their mom is asking it. They probably worked together to ask the same question twice.

This presumably private matter, however, became public to the other disciples and then, through Matthew and Mark's records, to the entire world.

B. At least she came in a humble manner, kneeling down to ask Jesus her question!

C. The question was that she wanted her two sons to have places of utmost prominence in the Kingdom—one at the right hand of the Lord and the other on the left. Sitting next to the Lord is a symbol that those would be the next most powerful in the kingdom.

Just thinking about that for a quick second might be confusing. It would seem difficult to fulfill this request since in Psalm 110:1, the LORD (Yahweh) tells the Lord (Adonai) to sit at His right hand—so how could someone sit at Jesus's *left* hand if there is no intervening space between God's right hand and Jesus's left side. But the text specifies that the right-hand sitting is "until I make your enemies Your footstool." This appears to be during the interregnum, that is, the present age until the Lord returns to reign in

His kingdom. So, when the Lord returns from Heaven, I suppose there will be space at His right hand and at his left. Verse 23 seems to confirm this, that is, that those two spaces will be available for use by someone.

II. Jesus's Answer: You Do Not Understand, v. 22-23

- A. The Lord opens his response with “You do not know what you ask.” The upcoming words will prove that out without a doubt. In this kind of request, you better know what you are getting into before asking, so that is one failure on the part of the mom and her sons.
- B. A second failure is this: they should not have asked this question in the first place because it was not in agreement with what the Lord was modeling for them and what He was teaching them. Like their “bad question” recorded in 18:1, it shows a lack of understanding of some basic stuff.
- C. Anyway, back to the first problem: the Lord asked them if they would be able to drink the cup He was about to drink, or to be baptized with the baptism He was soon to experience. This is figurative speech to refer to the persecution, suffering, and ultimately the wrath that He would experience as the substitute for sinners. No one else can actually experience or fulfill exactly what the Lord did, but we know that disciples often suffer in some way in this life. This is a daunting level of difficulty that those closest to the Lord experienced the most. Church history testifies of the terrible martyrdom of many of the first disciples, and then of many in later generations.
- D. The question of Jesus also expresses a truth: much greatness results only after much suffering (Luke 24:26, Rom. 8:18, Heb. 2:9-10, 1 Peter 4:13, 1 Peter 1:11, 5:1, 10). If you boldly seek such glory, that will likely come with suffering as a package deal.
- E. James and John answered straightforwardly, and over-confidently: “We are able.” They do not even know what they were about to face. But hopefully like the three young men Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they trusted in God to deliver them or keep them through whatever fire they would experience.

- F. The Lord promised them that indeed they would suffer. He knew that fact in His omniscience, just like He did for Peter (John 21:18-19). (In fact, He knew it because God had *ordained* it for these men, *not just* that it was bound to happen because of fate or some such.)
- G. However, there was a big catch. The Lord Jesus submitted himself to the will of the Father, and it is the person of the Father who has the prerogative to decide who will sit on Jesus's right and left hands. Those places will go to people who are worthy; people whom God wishes to honor. They will not appoint themselves. Not even the priests appointed themselves to their elevated office in ancient Israel (Hebrews 5:4).
- H. (Speculation) Personally I suspect there will be a rotation in one or both chairs. There certainly will be enough time for such a rotation to be implemented, given that the kingdom will be 1,000 years long. The Lord may well wish to honor more than a small number of people.

III. The Other Disciples Became Offended, v. 24

- A. The 10 disciples heard this and became upset at James and John. Why were they upset? Was it because they wanted James and John to have pure motives and be thinking in a godly way about greatness? Did they learn the lesson of chapter 18 and think, "Boy, James and John have not learned how to be like children and we need to help them become more sanctified!"
- B. The fact that they were "greatly displeased" indicates that their motives were not so pure. They did not react like Jesus did, who most certainly did not react with such indignation or anger at the two brothers. They reacted in the flesh, because I believe they jealously wanted what the other disciples had asked for, and they were kicking themselves that they did not think of it first!
- C. This caused a rift in the personal relationship of the 10 with the two brothers. Sin does that—and in this case, *both* groups were living in a sinful mindset. They needed to sprinkle a little grace in their relationships and recognize that all of them were sinners. There is not going to be a perfect, feel-good relationship between

all disciples all the time. We need to be able to deal with that without getting bent out of shape.

IV. The Lord Deals with the Offense by Teaching, v. 25-28

- A. The Lord reminds of this truth first: the world is concerned with hierarchical authority structures. Energetic and ambitious people are climbing, clawing, scratching, vying, competing, etc. for top spot in their organization, government, company, etc.
- B. The Lord then gives the disciples a prohibition: it will *not* be like that among you. That's an order from headquarters. So drop the line of questioning and the line of thinking that lies behind the questioning. Instead...
- C. Verse 26b and 27 teach what it *will* be like among the disciples of Christ. It will be that they will be jealous to serve to the point of "slavery" to their fellows. This is what will lead to greatness. By the way, it is not the pursuit of greatness that motivates this service! You do not use some kind of reverse logic to make yourself think you are not driven by self-glory and so you serve others just to be recognized and become famous as a self-less person, or even because you are enough about delayed gratification that you can serve now but you are really looking for the limelight later.

Later? The only one who will get the limelight is Jesus Christ.
- D. And if it is not that way, then you have a bad diagnosis: those who are *still* jockeying for position amongst themselves are giving evidence that they are not followers of *Christ*; rather, they are following the ways of the world and need to stop immediately and amend their ways.
- E. The model for this kind of service is Christ himself. The disciples were to serve one another "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." There are many other portions of Scripture that teach us to conduct ourselves in like manner as Christ. Here is a selection of them:
 - 1. Receive one another just as Christ received us (Rom. 15:7)
 - 2. Imitate Paul just as He imitates Christ (1 Cor. 11:1)

3. Forgive just as Christ forgave (Eph. 4:32)
4. Be subject to one another (wives to husbands) just as the church is subject to Christ (Eph. 5:24).
5. Husbands, love just as Christ loved (Eph. 5:25)
6. Husbands, cherish your wife as yourself, just as Christ does for the church (Eph. 5:29)
7. Walk just as Christ walked (1 John 2:6)
8. Purify yourself, just as Christ is pure (1 John 3:3)
9. Practice righteousness, just as Christ is righteous (1 John 3:7)

F. The Lord gave His life as a ransom for many. This is a clear verse on the doctrine of substitution. He offered Himself as a sacrifice to pay the ethical penalty for sin (death) *for* others so that they would not have to suffer the same punishment. Just remember, as important as this truth is, it is not the point of verses 20-28. It serves to *illustrate* the point because here we have the highest Person worthy of the most honor reducing Himself to the lowest place. He is great because His service was greatest in “distance” from high to low, and greatest in extent for all humanity.

Conclusion and Application

What does this message call to *your* attention?

In what way are you like James and John, or their mother, or the other disciples?

Do you have a “I want greatness” mindset? It can masquerade as an “I love attention” way of thinking. Or, “I love the limelight,” or “I like standing in front of a group of people and talking.” Or, “I want his job,” or “where I am at in life is not good enough for me.” This is much different than a “How can I help you?” attitude.

Is there an area of your life, or a person in your life, that calls forth the kind of service the Lord is talking about?

Do you live for self or for others?

Is there a way you can serve the body of Christ in a better way?