

The Path To The Cross, Part 3
Matthew 20:17-28
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Matthew 20:17-28

17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, 18 "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death 19 and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day." 20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." 24 And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

("The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.")

What are your dreams and desires for your kids? (*I realize that I'm addressing all ages and stages, including singles, teens, and others who don't have children. So if that's you, imagine being a parent.*) A lot of us want the best for our kids because we love them and want them to have a great life. Sometimes we have ulterior motivations, like when our kids are impressive it makes us look really good. (I resemble that remark, I'm very proud of my kids and like to brag on them.) Other times people take the opposite approach – my kids can't rise above me in life, I don't want to look bad. But I'd say most of us want good things for our kids because we love them and we'd like to celebrate and enjoy them throughout life; and a little bit of fear mixed in that either they'll embarrass us or they'll move back in or be drains on us.

When we want our kids to succeed and thrive, it can lead us to make some questionable choices to help them: things like doing their homework for them or covering for them so they won't get in trouble. The recent scandals of the Hollywood actresses who paid people to get their kids into the right colleges is an example of people who crossed some lines in their desires to help their kids. We say we would never do that, but we do things like it. Sometimes the line between helping and enabling is a fine one.

Today we're going to meet a woman who wants to help her sons in a great way, wants to advocate for them. She is a concerned mother who wants the best for her boys, but she doesn't know what she's asking. Because the context is not just getting them a job or into the right school, but getting a privileged place in heaven. Jesus explains that there's a way to live to accomplish that, but it's not the way that she's trying.

But before Jesus is approached by this mother, He explains to His disciples that He is destined to suffer and die.

I. Jesus Will Suffer And Die (vv. 17-19)

17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, 18 "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death 19 and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."

As we look at the first 3 verses of the passage, remember that this is the third time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus has told the Twelve disciples about His upcoming death (16:21 and 17:22-23) and our third sermon on these passages. I don't know how Jesus can get more specific than He does here about what is about to happen (other than maybe giving them exact names and times):

- in Jerusalem, I will be delivered to the Jews and condemned by them
- then I will delivered to the Gentiles who will abuse and crucify me
- I will be raised from the dead on the 3rd day

Jesus has set His course to Jerusalem, knowing full well that betrayal, pain and abuse await Him there. And He has already shown in His rebuke of Peter in chapter 16 that He will not let anyone take Him off the course that His Father has set out for Him. Jesus knows that these things are necessary for Him to undergo so that His mission to rescue and redeem sinners can be completed. He is letting the disciples know the game plan because He knows that to them it's going to look an awful lot like failure. And He wants them to eventually understand that not only will they have to deal with His suffering & death, but that they'll have to prepare for their own hard roads and their own suffering.

They don't know it yet, but...

II. The Disciples Will Suffer And Die (vv. 20-23)

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

Jesus has just gotten done huddling with the 12 apostles, telling them that He's headed to His death, warning them that there are some scary times ahead. You'd think that someone would ask some follow-up questions here (and maybe they did, they just didn't get recorded) like:

"What are they going to charge you with when they arrest you?"

"Will they be arresting us too?"

"How's that whole rising on the 3rd day piece going to work out?"

But instead here comes the mother of James and John, who just has terrible timing, not at all sensing the somber mood: "Hey, Jesus, I heard you say something about how your 12 apostles will be rewarded with thrones in the new world. (Which is what Jesus said back in 19:28) While you're at it, you think you can give my two boys the best seats in the house? I won't tell you who to put where, just as long as they're next to you so everybody sees how important they are."

You've met this parent, haven't you? The one who bugs the coach to have their son start on the soccer or baseball team when they haven't earned it. The parent who lobbies the teacher to raise their kid's grade. The "helicopter parent" who is around to make sure their kid gets preferential treatment, that everyone acknowledges their greatness, their specialness. Certainly there are times in life when you need to stick up for your children, but there are other times when they didn't earn something and they

need to learn a tough lesson, not be bailed out by mom and dad. James and John are grown men, that's just embarrassing to have Mom bugging your boss for a promotion.

But, you know what? As tacky or poorly-timed as Mom's request is, at least she's asking the question in faith.¹ She believes Jesus, she takes Him at His word that He will someday be sitting on a throne and have the power to reward His followers. At least she's not asking, "Uh, after you get killed and this whole thing dies out, what's your plan for my kids? Who's gonna protect them when the Romans put a price on their heads because they followed you?" It may not be the right question she asks, but at least it's a question coming from a heart that believes Jesus is who He says He is. Do you remember who Matthew says is one of the three women at the cross when Jesus dies in Matthew 27:56? It's Mary, Mary, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee; she followed Jesus to the end.

But then Jesus answers, and turns to address James and John, that while they believe that Jesus will have the power to reward them, they have misunderstood the path to glory. Jesus talks about a cup that He is to drink. The cup that Jesus is talking about is an OT image. Listen to these two passages:

-Isaiah 51:17- *"Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering."*

-Jeremiah 25:15- *"Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: 'Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.'"*

Drinking the cup of the Lord is symbolic of having God's wrath taken out on you. Jesus knows full well that He is going to have to drink the cup of God's wrath when He dies on the cross and pays the penalty for the sins of His people. And He essentially is telling the disciples: "If you want my glory, you've gotta take my pain."

I don't really think James and John know what He's asking of them when He asks if they can drink the cup that He is to drink. "Oh yeah, we're able," they reply confidently. And Jesus says, "You're right about that. Maybe worry about that more than worrying about whether you'll be given places of honor in my kingdom."

Will the disciples drink the cup of wrath? Yes, they will. But at their first opportunity to share in Christ's suffering, they will flee!² When Jesus is arrested in the Garden, all the disciples desert Him and run away. Their first chance to suffer with Jesus is passed on. But after Jesus' death and resurrection and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples become emboldened to suffer for their faith. James will die a martyrs' death by Herod's sword, according to Acts 12:2. John will live to an old age, but be exiled to an island at the end of his life.

Peter was the exact same way: "I'd die for you, Lord" he tells Jesus later in the gospels. And Jesus says, "Well, first you're going to deny me 3 times." Which, of course, he does. But eventually he gets on track with taking on the mission of Jesus, and drinking from the cup of suffering, eventually being crucified upside down for his faith.

We're called to drink from that same cup as well. The New Testament is packed with reminders that we need to prepare to suffer, to endure hardships for the Lord. Not that that's an easy thing.

¹ Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew*. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008, p. 225.

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997, p.

Remember that it was hard even for Jesus to drink of the cup of wrath. Remember what Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane when He was praying- Matthew 26:39 He says, “*My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.*”

It was hard for the disciples to drink from the cup of suffering because they wanted glory not pain. And it’s hard for us to drink from the cup of suffering because we want to succeed without pain. Don’t despair if you’re thinking over your life and know that you’ve passed up times to take the hard road for Jesus; that you’ve rejected experiencing pain for Him in favor of comfort and the esteem of others. We all have, just as the disciples did. But you can resolve to follow Jesus in the future and resolve to get out of your comfort zone, be willing to be laughed at, to feel the pain of rejection for being a believer.

Because according to Jesus,

III. You Are Called To Suffer And Die (vv. 24-28)

24 And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

There has been a lot of news coming out in the past few years about the behavior of some famous pastors and ministry leaders with some crazy finances. We’ve had a pastor whose house is 16,000 square feet and is worth \$1.7 million and apparently a couple pastors whose churches paid over a couple hundred thousand dollars to a manipulative service that ensures that their books make it on the best-seller lists. I don’t mention those to pile on the criticism, and hey, “there but for the grace of God go I”- I have no delusions that I’m above the temptations of money, success, and pride. And there’s been some repentance in those situations, thank the Lord.

But it can be very difficult to reconcile Jesus’ words to give up our lives, serve others, not to seek greatness and wealth when some of the most famous pastors and ministry leaders are modeling the exact opposite. And that’s not even mentioning the easy targets of the prosperity preachers who would twist all of these sayings of Jesus into a way to get God to bless you and live “in the favor of the King.” But don’t be disillusioned by those believers and leaders who ignore Jesus’ call to humility and avoiding ambition.

You don’t become great in Jesus’ eyes, in the kingdom of heaven, by shooting for greatness. You don’t try to rack up awards, impress the most people, remind people that you’re on top, hire a publicist to spread your name. You want to be great? Aim to be small. Which is pretty much our natural state anyways, we’re nothing but a speck in the universe and a tiny fraction of a dot on the timeline of history.

Seek the needs of others, consider others better than yourself. Stop building your world around you to please yourself. The irony of people who want to please themselves and always be happy and get their way is that, even when they are happy occasionally, they’re overall miserable. The ultimate joy is found in looking outside of ourselves and serving others. We are called to die to ourselves, to die to our own desires and goals.

Conclusion

“Whoever would be great would be a servant... whoever would be first must be a slave.” If the One person who deserves to be honored and served more than anyone else in the history of the world has embraced a role of serving others, I don’t think it’s too much to ask for us to do the same.

Jesus' incarnation (becoming a man) was an act of servanthood.
Jesus' whole life of obedience was an act of servanthood.
Jesus' submitting to death was an act of servanthood.

If you call yourself a Christian, you are saying you are a "little Christ." If you think you are somehow exempt from following His example, from submitting to His Lordship over your life and surrendering everything, then you have not thought deeply enough about your union with Christ. You might be treating your salvation as just a door prize that you get at the end of your life if you hold on to the right beliefs. But salvation is so much deeper than that, because in your salvation, you are regenerated into a new creation, one that is indwelt by the Spirit and directed towards the things of God.

Galatians 2:20 says, *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."* Christ living in me empowers me to serve others. You mean I need to serve my family? I need to serve other Christians? I need to serve my co-workers? My neighbors? What about my enemies? Yes, yes, yes, and yes.

If you are not a Christian, I wish I could offer you a Christianity that was easy, that was always fun and made you the most popular person on your block. But I can't. But you know deep down that anything in life that is worthwhile comes with work, sweat, and a bit of pain. So it shouldn't surprise you that the most important thing in life involves sacrifice and change.

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." –Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Not dying physically immediately, but willingness to die. Willingness to suffer anything for the sake of Christ and His kingdom. If you want Christ's glory, you've got to take His pain.

Because He took your pain first. The very last part of this passage says that the Son of Man would *"give his life as a ransom for many."* Jesus' death on the cross paid the ransom for your sin. Jesus offered Himself to deliver you from your sin and the consequence of spiritual death and hell. This is actually the first explicit passage in the entire New Testament that explains that Christ's death is a sacrificial atonement. Matthew has mentioned Jesus' death before, but hasn't said anything about it being a substitute or a ransom. Jesus was not going to die simply to be an inspiring martyr. He was not going to die just as an example of self-giving love. No, His death achieved something – taking the place of punishment for us, paying the ransom for the price that was due for our sin. 1 Peter 1:18-19 says that *"you were ransomed... not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ."*

Jesus gave up everything, was a servant in every way He could be, and you have the key to eternal life and salvation because of it. He calls you to respond to Him in faith, to embrace His death as a ransom for your sin, and then to model your life after His servant hood.

Benediction: Philippians 2:5-11

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. **9** Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, **10** so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.