

Matthew 20:20-28

I. Matthew 20:20-21 — Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. 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.”

Now in Mark’s Gospel, he actually portrays *James and John* as the ones who make this request of Jesus (Mark 10:35–37). In other words, even though the mother spoke the actual words of request, her two sons were no less involved. So “the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to [Jesus] *with [the full support of] her sons*, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.”

Matthew tells us that the mother of James and John was one of those who had followed Jesus from Galilee and who had been ministering to Him along the way (27:55-56). You could say that she was probably very “familiar” with Jesus and with His little band of disciples. And yet here she is kneeling before Jesus as if He were a powerful monarch of some earthly kingdom and asking Him to grant her request.

“[Jesus] 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.’” Now there are two ways to look at this. On the one hand, there’s not one shred of “evidence” to say that Jesus is about to become the powerful monarch of an earthly kingdom. It’s just Jesus and the twelve disciples “as usual,” walking down the road same as everyone else, going up to Jerusalem same as everyone else. And yet somehow James, and John, and their mother are able to see past these mundane circumstances to a day when Jesus is sitting enthroned in Jerusalem, and His twelve disciples with Him (cf. 19:28). Luke tells us that because Jerusalem was now so close, the disciples were supposing that Jesus’ enthronement in Jerusalem would also be soon to come (Luke 19:11). But what about the fact that Jesus just predicted His betrayal, and suffering, and death in Jerusalem? Are the disciples off in some fantasy dream world? Not at all! Mark tells us that as they walked along the road, the disciples were following *behind* Jesus – amazed *and* fearful (Mark 10:32). So there are *no* visible signs to say that the promised kingdom is about to arrive. None at all. And then there’s the nagging prospect of *suffering* ahead. And yet in spite of these things, James and John (and their mother) are still able to *believe* that the kingdom is just around the corner – that Jesus will soon be sitting on an actual, physical throne in the actual, physical city of Jerusalem. So is this belief just the result of deluded and wishful thinking? Not at all! It’s based on the disciples’ understanding of who Jesus is, and therefore it’s based on their *faith* in the *promises* of God. This is really an amazing and greatly commendable faith! If only *we* could have a faith like this!

And yet *side by side* with this very deeply rooted faith is a spiritual blindness that’s *shocking*. Have the disciples not heard *anything* that Jesus has just been saying over, and over, and over again? Here James and John are lobbying for positions of authority in the kingdom when Jesus has just told them that the last will be first, and the first last, and that the greatest in the kingdom are those who assume for themselves the status of little children! So on the one hand, we have

this amazing faith in who Jesus is, and God's power to fulfill His promises seemingly against all the evidence! And yet on the other hand, there *continues* to be a *complete* and *total* lack of understanding as to what true greatness in the kingdom really is! James and John are a living **contradiction** – a powerful faith side by side with total blindness; a deep spiritual understanding side by side with a total lack of comprehension. And here's a lesson for us. We should not think of James and John at this point as we may be tempted to think of them. Their amazing example of faith *should* be obvious to all of us. And yet somehow, we usually miss it entirely. *Why?* Because it's hard for us to believe that this kind of dense, spiritual blindness can exist side by side with a faith that's actually worthy of our imitation. If I have true faith and understanding *here*, then it seems impossible that I could be so utterly deluded and blinded *over here – and at the same time*. But the example of James and John warns us against believing this lie. It is possible for all of us to be living contradictions, just like James and John – powerful examples of faith and spiritual understanding on the one hand, and terrible examples of unbelief and spiritual blindness on the other. This should cause us to be truly humble even when we've seen great spiritual growth in our lives. Because we can see and not see even at the *same* time! We can be full of faith, and full of unbelief even at the *same* time! We can understand deeply, and lack all comprehension even at the *same* time! We can give a needed rebuke to our brother, and at the *same* time be in desperate need of our brother's rebuke! This should teach us humility, and this should also remind us that a brother or sister who is spiritually blind or weak or immature in one area may *still* be a powerful **example** to us of the kind of faith that pleases God. Remember, God *uses* sinful, imperfect people to accomplish His purposes and to make a full display of His grace. Maybe now we'll look at James and John in a new light. Maybe now we'll see in James and John more *hope* for us.

So James and John want to sit, one at Jesus right hand, and one at Jesus' left when He sits on His throne in Jerusalem...

II. Matthew 20:22 — Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"

Even as Jesus prayed on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," so now Jesus says to the disciples: "You do not know what you are asking." "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" The "cup" that Jesus is to drink is the cup of suffering (Isa. 51:17-23; Lam. 4:21; Mat. 26:39), and so Jesus implies that the path to His right and left hand is the path not of works, or of obedience, or of special privileges and connections, but of **suffering**. You want to sit at my right and left hand, but are you willing to suffer with my sufferings?

III. Matthew 20:22 — They said to him, "We are able."

Once again, James and John are not stupid. I don't know how else to say it, and say what I mean. They know their Old Testament. They know that the "cup" means suffering. And somehow, in their own minds, they believe very "sincerely" that they will be up to the challenge. Even though they are somewhat fearful and afraid, they are determined to persevere through whatever sufferings may lie ahead. They're sincere, but they're also a little naïve. Their response is to

quick – too *easy*. Jesus knows that James and John will flee from the prospect of suffering when His own trial comes (Mat. 26:56). But Jesus is patient.

IV. Matthew 20:23 — 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 doesn’t jump all over His disciples for being presumptuous and ignorant. He knows they mean well, and He acknowledges that they *will* ultimately be enabled to drink His cup of suffering (cf. Acts 12:2; Rev. 1:9). “But,” He says, “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.” So does this mean that there will be different positions of status and authority in the kingdom? And are these special positions rewards for obedience and good works? Are there really only *two* positions “open” at Jesus right and left hand? But how does this fit with Jesus’ parable of “the Laborers in the Vineyard,” where He was essentially saying to Peter, “Peter, would it bother you to know that there are many who are far less ‘worthy’ than you, who will receive a reward *equal* to yours?” (cf. Blomberg) So what about these seats at Jesus’ right and left hand? What do they mean – and how do they fit with *grace*?

One commentator writes this: “Chrysostom... believes that the criterion for the Father’s assignment [of these seats] is *good works*. But Matthew’s record here leaves the matter to *the mystery of the sovereignty of God*.” (Bruner) Jesus says: “*It is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father*.” This *is* a mystery, because no one knows exactly *who* will be sitting in these special places of glory and honor! And yet the *reason* for the Father’s assignment may *not* be a *total* mystery. On the one hand, we assume that the criterion is *not* good works or any kind of human “worthiness.” On the other hand, Jesus very clearly implies that at least one criterion for these special seats is *suffering*. “You do not know what you are asking,” He said; “Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” For whom are these special seats prepared? – Perhaps for those whom God has appointed to share most fully in the sufferings of Christ, according to the mysterious purposes of His own sovereign will. Notice Jesus never says there will only be *one* seat at His right hand and only *one* seat at His left hand for a total of only *two* seats. There’s no reason to think that Jesus was concerned to correct every single faulty assumption. My guess is that there will actually be a multitude of “seats” at Jesus’ right and left hand, and that these special places of glory and honor have been prepared not as rewards for those who have been most faithful, but rather as *comfort and vindication* for those whom God has appointed to share most fully in the sufferings of Christ. So in one sense, all will be *equal* in the kingdom of God *because all is of God’s free and sovereign grace* (cf. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard)! But there’s another sense in which we can say that all will *not* be equal in the kingdom of God, *because all is of God’s free and sovereign grace*! (cf. Calvin) Will those of us who don’t get a special seat at Christ’s right or left hand feel gypped, or envious, or like we’re somehow second rate citizens of the kingdom? Far from it! Instead, we will rejoice greatly with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15), and this very rejoicing will, if possible, only *add* to our own eternal *bliss and happiness*! We will rejoice greatly with our brothers and sisters who were appointed to so much suffering, and yet whose sufferings are not being so *richly*, and so *fully*, and so *abundantly* compensated.

- ✓ Romans 8:16–17 — The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we *suffer* with him in order that we may also be *glorified* with him.
- ✓ 1 Peter 4:13 — But rejoice insofar as [*“to the degree that”*; NASB] you share Christ’s *sufferings*, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his *glory* is revealed.

So even as we pray earnestly for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, let us also rejoice with them in the indescribable glory, and honor, and comfort, and vindication that will be especially lavished upon *them* when the kingdom comes. And what about us? To the degree that we have been appointed to share in Christ’s sufferings, *let us rejoice*.

Now so far Jesus has not dealt with the sinful attitude behind James’ and John’s request – the one that flows from their spiritual denseness and blindness. So far, He’s only explained the criterion for who will occupy the seats at His right and left hand, and why these seats are not His to give. So why does Jesus *wait* to confront what appears to be the *main* problem? I believe He was waiting for this:

V. Matthew 20:24 — And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.

Have *none* of the disciples heard anything that Jesus has said? Has it all gone in one ear and right out the other? In their “indignation,” the rest of the disciples only prove that they’re *just as dense* and spiritually *blind* as James and John. But how can this be? How can this kind of “denseness” possibly be explained? Well, isn’t the answer easy? The answer is pride. *Pride* explains *everything* that makes no sense. In fact, pride explains our own astonishing blindness to our own *pride*. J.C. Ryle writes: “Pride is one of the oldest and most mischievous of sins. By it the angels fell... Through pride Adam and Eve were seduced into eating the forbidden fruit. They were not content with their lot, and thought ‘they would be as Gods.’ From pride the saints of God receive their greatest injuries after their conversion. Well says Hooker, ‘Pride is a vice, which cleaves so fast unto the hearts of men, that if we were to strip ourselves of *all* faults, one by one, we should undoubtedly find it the very last and hardest to put off.’ It is a quaint but true saying of Bishop Hall, that ‘pride is the inmost coat, which we put off *last*, and which we put on *first*.’” Pride is the *source* of all our other sins, even the “sins” that seem the least prideful – like insecurity, and self-pity. Pride is the sin of “*self*.” Pride is the sin of “*me*.” And so pride is the one sin that is equally common to all – though it may be more or less subtle in its expression from one person to another. Pride is the besetting sin in my life that gives way to every other besetting sin that I will ever struggle with. Pride explains *perfectly* the blindness of the disciples. Pride explains perfectly why the disciples were so blinded to their pride. And so as Calvin puts it, “our Lord intended to seize on this occasion for laying open a disease which was lurking within [the disciples]” – a disease that also lurks within each one of us.

VI. Matthew 20:25–27 — 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. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.”

Calvin sums up: “[Jesus] shows that the primacy, which was the occasion of dispute among them, *has no existence* in his kingdom.” The *kind* of status that the disciples were thinking of *doesn’t even have any existence* in the kingdom of heaven – not *now*, and not *ever*! So even the seats at Jesus’ right and left hand are not to be thought of as higher positions of status and power. The phrase, “lord it over,” implies an arrogant abuse of authority. But the disciples’ problem was not a desire to arrogantly abuse a position of status and power. The disciples’ problem was that they thought such positions of status and power existed *at all* in the kingdom! So we could translate Jesus’ words like this (cf. Carson): “You know that the rulers of the nations exercise lordship over them [that’s perfectly legitimate], and their great ones exercise authority over them [that’s perfectly legitimate]. It shall not be so among you.” It’s not just the sinful attitudes of the world that we must not transfer into the church, it’s also the very structures of the world (so legitimate in their own place) that we must not by any means transfer into the church (cf. Carson)! Positions of status and power in the world (no matter how biblically exercised) can have no true equivalent in the Church of Jesus Christ – anywhere, ever, at all. That’s just not how the kingdom works. “It shall not be so among you.” It shall not be so in My Church.

“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.” Calvin writes: “Let the *only* greatness, eminence, and rank, which you desire, be, to submit to your brethren; and let *this* be your primacy, to be the *servants* [and slaves] of all.”

VII. Matthew 20:28 — Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Over, and over, and over again, Jesus has said the same thing to His disciples. “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (18:3). “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:4). “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (18:10). “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (19:14). “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” (19:30). “So the last will be first, and the first last” (20:16).

And yet after all of this teaching, we still find the disciples up in arms over who will have the first and highest positions of status and power in the kingdom (as if any such positions even existed). So what is to be done? What else can Jesus say? J.C. Ryle says this: “The Lord God has mercifully provided His people with everything necessary to their sanctification. He has given those who follow after holiness the clearest of precepts, the best of motives, and the most encouraging of promises. But this is not all. He has furthermore supplied them with *the most perfect pattern and example*, even the life of His own Son. By that life he bids us frame our own. In the steps of that life He bids us walk.” Jesus said: “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.” And then He concluded, “Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” How can this not cause us to feel deeply *ashamed* for our pride? What could possibly be more *opposed* to our pride than the perfect example of Jesus? What could possibly have a more *cleansing and purifying* influence upon our sinful and prideful hearts than our

careful reflection and meditation on the example of Jesus – who came not so that He might be served, but so that He might serve others, even by giving His own life as a ransom for many.”
This should be the death of our pride!

Conclusion

There is only one besetting sin that is equally common to all Christians. It’s the sin that makes us blind to our sin. It’s the sin that explains anything and everything about us that doesn’t make sense. It’s the sin that explains the contradictions in us all. And that sin is pride – the sin of “*self*,” the sin of “*me*.” And so every day we need desperately to be reminded not only of the *teaching* of Jesus, but also—and especially—of Jesus’ own *example*. If **He** came not to be served but to serve; if **He** came to give His life as a ransom for many, then what other “greatness” could we possibly wish for than to be the “*servant*” and even the “*slave*” of *all* – and especially of everyone sitting around me in this room?

But we feel it in our hearts, don’t we? – The struggle with pride continues, and we *fail* day after day. And now the example of the disciples reminds us that it’s our pride that blinds us to our *pride*. It’s our pride that makes our pride so subtle and undetectable. Our struggle with pride is never-ending because it’s our struggle with “*self*” – with “*me*”! O “wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24)

Praise God, Jesus came not *just* to be our perfect example, but first and foremost to be our perfect *sacrifice*. So even as He was setting for me the perfect example of *humility*, He was *dying* for *my pride*. He was giving his life *as a ransom for many* – so that by His death in our place we might be set free from the penalty of pride, and from the power of pride, and ultimately, one day, set free even from the very last remnants of the *presence* of pride! “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Rom. 7:24)

Let this then be the *only* greatness that we *ever* wish for or desire – to be the *servants and the slaves* of all.