

JESUS CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE

Matthew 20:1-34

Key Verse 28

“...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.”

Tomorrow is my 53rd birthday. I thought about my two most memorable birthdays. Interestingly, they involved small acts of service. One was on Super bowl Sunday. I went to the campus in the evening with my wife to invite students to Bible study. It was a fruitful visit for we met Scott who studied the Bible for several years. The other time I gave a ride to my Bible student to the football stadium for an ROTC drill. He also asked if I could drive two of his friends. When I mentioned it was my birthday, one of them asked, “So what did you do for yourself today?” I said, “Actually, it’s been a busy day for me. And I’m glad to do something for others like giving this ride. It helps me to realize that God made me to bless and serve others in some way.” My most memorable birthdays were when I could serve others in some small way.

Today’s passage includes a parable of the kingdom, a prediction of Jesus and two pleas directed to Jesus. All of these events teach us about Jesus and the attitude and actions of a good disciple of Jesus. May we all learn of Jesus and grow as his true disciples.

First, our God is so generous. Only Matthew records this parable in verses 1-16 called the Parable of the Vineyard Workers. On the surface it seems very unfair, and the landowner seems to be a poor businessman. Look at verses 1-7.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’”

Jesus said this story characterizes the kingdom of heaven. The landowner is God or Jesus Christ. He was very diligent to go out and hire unemployed men. It is clear that these men were at the mercy of those who had land and money to hire workers. If they got work, they would get a denarius for the day, which was let’s

JESUS CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE

say equivalent to a minimum wage job. If they got work, they could feed their families. If not, they might go hungry for that day. So to be hired was a great joy and privilege. Those hired early in the day did not have to worry for the rest of the day. As long as they worked hard, they were promised a denarius for that day.

These men were not necessarily lazy. Of course, it says they were standing around, doing nothing. But at least they weren't at home sleeping all day. They went to the market place in the hope to be hired for that day. Some even waited until 5 p.m. to work even one hour. And they were willing to accept whatever the landowner decided to pay them, for to work for something was better than not working at all.

Here we see the diligence of God to rescue perishing souls. God is seeking the unemployed and offering them a job, not to get something from them, but to give them joy, peace and fulfillment in life. Without God's grace, we are like unemployed people, with no meaningful work or task to live for. We all need to find our blessed purpose of life in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ. Otherwise, eventually, we will feel that our lives were for nothing. Psalm 84:10 expresses well the blessedness of doing something that puts us near God: **"Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked."**

The surprise of the parable comes at pay time. Look at verses 8-16.

"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Temporary employees like this were paid at the end of each day, since it was often all they had to live on. Those hired last were probably expecting 1/12 of a denarius, like \$10. So they were delighted when they received a full day's pay for working only 1 hour! It was incredible generosity from the landowner. The

JESUS CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE

landowner wasn't thinking about what he got out of the workers. Rather, he was thinking about how this was helping them and their families in a hard situation. He was so generous and gracious. Those who worked 3 hours, 6 hours and 9 hours also got a denarius. Finally, those who worked the full day for 12 hours also got a denarius. Understandably, when they compared their work with those hired later, they grumbled saying, "That's unfair! We deserve more than the others who worked so little."

So who is this parable speaking about? It might be referring to the Jews who had a long history with God and a sense of entitlement. So they were not happy to welcome the Gentiles into the kingdom. Or, it could refer to Christians who started following Christ earlier in their lives. They might feel entitled to more blessing or reward than those who came later in their lives.

This is not a parable about rewards, for the Bible does speak about rewards for our labor, and this parable says they all get the same. The denarius could represent salvation or God's grace, which no one deserves, but which we all must be grateful for. What Jesus emphasizes is not the pay but the attitude of the worker. The workers all agreed to work for what the landowner deemed right. The landowner had the right to do whatever he wanted with his own money. Those who are in his service must not be envious, comparing themselves with others. To compare ourselves or our tasks with others leads to pride on the one hand or envy on the other. Apostle Paul addressed this in Romans 14:4, **"Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand."**

This week the famous evangelist Luis Palau was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. It was an unexpected shock to him, since he felt in great health. Some people may think, "How could God let this happen to a faithful gospel preacher?" Of course, the evangelist was not happy about the news. But he testified that Isaiah 41:10 encouraged him: **"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."** Sometimes we don't feel we are getting what we deserve for our labor and sacrifice in the Lord. Even Saint Paul prayed to God for a thorn in his flesh to be removed. But his prayer was not answered as he wanted. Instead, God gave him this word: **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"** (2Co 12:9). God's grace is indeed sufficient for each one of us. Let's throw away any grumbling or feelings of entitlement or deserving something, and just be thankful for the grace to know and serve the Lord Jesus Christ as long as we have breath.

JESUS CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE

Jesus concluded the parable saying in verse 16, **“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”** This was a repetition of Jesus’ last verse in chapter 19, verse 30. After promising his twelve apostles a throne in his kingdom and 100 times as much reward as they had sacrificed for him, Jesus said, **“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”** In heaven, things will not be as they were on earth. Those who had much wealth and power in the world, may not even enter the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The things that are highly valued in this world are usually not worth very much in the kingdom of heaven. All the great saints in history recognized this. May God give us grace and wisdom to pursue the eternal things of God, forsaking the glories and riches of this world for Jesus’ name sake.

Second, Jesus predicts his passion again. Now look at verses 17-19.

“Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, ‘We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!’”

This is the third time that Jesus explicitly prophesied his suffering, death and resurrection. This time he added more details. Jesus would be delivered or handed over to the Jewish leaders, who would condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles, that is the Romans. Jesus would be mocked, flogged and crucified. And on the third day, Jesus would be raised to life again. Jesus kept repeating this because he knew they were not really following him for the reward of heaven. They wanted something in this world. No one aspires to a life of suffering. Naturally, we desire glory, honor and wealth in this world. In a word, very few people have given up worldly wealth or position to serve the Lord in human history. Moses is one of them. St. Francis of Assisi is another.

Earlier this month, the actor Jim Caviezel spoke at a Christian event in Chicago. He is the actor who played Jesus Christ in the movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” During the filming of the movie, he was accidentally whipped, separated his shoulder, was struck by lightning and needed open-heart surgery for hypothermia. He suffered much to play the role of Jesus Christ. I want to show one minute of his talk (minute 8:30—9:33): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9z-dMQjRBE> (The video is titled: Jim Caviezel Paul apostle of Christ SLS18).

Jesus makes it very clear that his followers are not called to a life of comfort, ease or worldly glory. Jesus calls us to a life of denying ourselves, taking up our

JESUS CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE

crosses and following him. Of course, he promises us the greatest blessings of salvation, purpose, peace and joy.

Third, two pleas directed to Jesus. In verses 20-28 we hear the plea of a mother and Jesus' reply, and in verses 29-34 we hear the plea of two men who cry out to Jesus. Look at verses 20-23.

“Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ‘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.’ ‘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 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.’”

Comparing the gospels, we can discover that the mother of Zebedee’s sons, that is, James and John, was named Salome. This is not the Salome who danced for Herod. Some scholars say she was likely the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. If so, James and John were cousins of Jesus. Perhaps a kindred fact like this might have assisted her request. In any case, in a humble and desperate posture she asked what most mothers want for their children: the seats next to Jesus in his kingdom. It was a bold and shameless request, especially in the hearing of the other ten apostles. Jesus asked James and John if they could drink his cup. This was not a cup of wine. The cup referred to suffering for righteousness. **“We can,”** they replied. It was a bold statement, considering that they fled on the night of his arrest.

Nonetheless, Jesus did not belittle or rebuke them as boastful or premature. Jesus foresaw that they would indeed drink from his cup but the seats next to him would be granted at the Father’s discretion and will.

How did the other ten disciples respond to James and John’s request, through their mother? They became indignant, that is, greatly displeased. They were angry probably not because their desires were more pure, but that James and John had the gall to openly ask Jesus this, even enlisting their mother’s help. Jesus used this opportunity as a teaching moment once again. Jesus was so patient with his immature disciples, as he is with us.

“Jesus 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. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you

JESUS CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE

must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first 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.’”

Jesus turned the tables on how to be great. Jesus did not rebuke them for aspiring to honor and glory with Jesus. But he explained to them the true road to greatness, which is very different from the world’s way. In the world, people compete and compare with one another to get ahead of others: from getting into college, to getting a job promotion, to getting athletic or academic honors, to being elected for any office, to getting into clubs. Some call it: keeping up with the Joneses. If the neighbor has something cool or awesome, we want to get one too, or something better than what they have: a house, a car, a gadget.

Jesus makes it clear that true greatness is not how much money you have, or how many degrees you have, or how many times you are mentioned in a newsletter or report. Rather, it has to do with serving and helping. Who is the least person you have served in the name of Jesus?

A few months ago someone called me, asking me for a ride (don’t worry it’s none of you here; if it had been, I would’ve probably given you one). Rather, this person was not regular to our church. I felt the request crossed the line. So I said, “Judge for yourself whether you think it is right that I should be your personal chauffeur, when you have a car, even if you feel sick.” Of course, he was quite angry and rebuked me. My point is: I did not want to serve to that degree. I thought my response was right and justified. But I cannot say it was a good imitation of Jesus.

Jesus had just predicted his suffering, death and resurrection. Then James and John asked for seats in his kingdom. Jesus would be warranted to rebuke them soundly saying, “When will you guys ever learn?” But Jesus understood their desire for greatness and patiently taught them how to obtain it: through serving.

For this, Jesus served his disciples. Jesus served the sick and needy. Jesus sacrificed sleep and food and suffered insults, hatred and humiliation in order to serve a world of ungrateful sinners. Finally Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. A ransom is a payment to set someone free. Jesus paid the price of our rebellion and sin by dying on the cross on our behalf. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Apostle Peter wrote: **“He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’”**

JESUS CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE

In verses 29-34, near Jericho, two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, **“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”** The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, **“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”** Remember that a similar thing had happened when people brought children to Jesus. Children and blind men looked unimportant to the crowds. How about to Jesus?

Jesus stopped and called them. **“What do you want me to do for you?”** he asked. **“Lord,”** they answered, **“we want our sight.”** Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.

These men were blind. But they had better spiritual sight than the crowds, perhaps even better than Jesus’ own disciples. They recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of David. They believed that Jesus could heal them and they asked boldly for their sight. Here we see that we can ask Jesus for what he alone can and wants to give us. If Jesus asks you, what do you want, what will you ask for?

Also, when they were healed, they immediately followed Jesus. Jesus is pleased to hear our prayer when our intention is to serve Jesus and others and follow him. What is your prayer to Jesus? Years ago, I experienced an amazing answer to prayer. Since we were praying so much for Russia, I prayed to find a genuine Russian student at Northwestern to study the Bible with. I didn’t even know if there were any Russian students at NU. Though I didn’t go often to campus, maybe once a week, and for a short time, I invited one girl student. She said, “No,” with some kind of accent. I asked her, “What country are you from?” She said, “Russia!” My eyes lit up. I told her about my prayer and asked her again to study the Bible. She said, “OK” and she also introduced the three other Russian students at NU to me for Bible study. Based on a student body of 10,000 students, that means even if I had invited 100 NU students I had a 4% chance of meeting one of the Russian students. These days I’m praying to have Bible study with a Muslim student at NU. May God give us earnest prayers that agree with his heart and will.

As I prepared this message, I read the stories of two men, one from France and one from Japan. The Frenchman became a monk in 1666 and worked in a monastery kitchen. At first, he hated his job. But he decided to worship God in the kitchen, not only in the cathedral. He prayed, “Lord of all pots and pans...make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the dishes.” He became known as Brother Lawrence and he wrote a short Christian classic called, “The Practice of the Presence of God.”

JESUS CAME TO SERVE AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE

The other man was named Toyohiko Kawaga. To imitate Christ, he went to live in the slums at age 21, even though he was suffering from tuberculosis. He went to live in a 6-foot-by-6 hut in a Tokyo slum. On his first night, he was asked to share his bed with a man suffering from contagious itch. It was a test of his faith. He welcomed the man. Then a beggar asked for his shirt and got it. The next day he asked for Kawaga's coat and trousers, and got them too. He was left standing in a ragged kimono. The slum dwellers laughed at him, but they came to respect him. Later, he was imprisoned for apologizing to the People of China for Japanese crimes against them in the war. It is not easy for anyone to imitate Jesus Christ. Maybe moving to the slums is beyond our reach. But we can start by serving even one person in the name of Jesus. May God help us to grow in the grace of Christ as his servants.