

Jesus Came to Serve and to Give

Matthew 20:17-34

Key Verse: 20:28

“...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.”

As we have been studying in chapters 18-20, Jesus taught many things to help his disciples develop a healthy community life. In this passage, Jesus deals with another problem that disrupted the fellowship of his disciples. Two of them put themselves forward to claim the seats at Jesus' right and left in his kingdom. Their blatant attempt to seize power evoked a strong response from the other disciples which threatened their unity. This can happen in any field of endeavor. Gifted athletes fail to win championships when they reveal selfish ambition at a critical moment. Academic achievements have been spoiled by fights to claim honor. And in Christian ministry many teams and projects have failed when the spirit of selfish ambition arose in their midst. Indeed, selfish ambition hidden in people's hearts destroys communities. In today's passage Jesus teaches how to solve this problem. Jesus does not offer a quick fix; he offers a cure that heals this malady from the root. Let's listen carefully to Jesus' words.

I. Jesus proclaimed his death and resurrection to the disciples (17-19)

Verse 17 begins, **“Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem.”** Jesus had been on the east side of the Jordan River, in the region referred to as Perea. There, he healed the sick and taught his disciples some important lessons. It was a kind of “calm before the storm” during the last weeks before his passion. Now the time had come for him to go to Jerusalem, where he would offer his own life for the salvation of mankind. 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!”** Jesus proclaimed to his disciples what we know as the facts of the gospel. This was Jesus' message to them ever since Peter

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confessed him to be the Christ (Mt 16:21). It is the core of Jesus' teaching and the most important thing for them to understand and remember.

In verse 18, Jesus calls himself the "Son of Man." It recalls the prophecy in Daniel 7:13-14 in which the Son of Man appears before the Ancient of Days to receive power and glory and honor to reign over all creation forever. This means that Jesus is in very nature God, and that after all is said and done in time and space, Jesus will reign supreme as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But the way this would come about was mysterious to fallen man. Jesus would not use his power to win political or military conquests. Jesus would use his power to endure suffering and death. He would then be raised again. Jesus would become the first in all creation, as we learned in Colossians, but before that he would be the very least. He would be condemned to death by the chief priests and the teachers of the law. Innocent Jesus submitted to terrible injustice in order to gain the right to justify sinners. Jesus was mocked, flogged and crucified. Isaiah explained the meaning of this, saying, **"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed"** (Isa 53:5). We are the ones who should suffer and die for our sins. But Jesus took all our punishment in his own body. Jesus forgives all our sins and frees us from the power of sin. Jesus gave us the right to become God's children. Now we have salvation and eternal life in Jesus. This expresses God's great love for us.

This is the gospel and it is the reason Jesus came into this world. It is the key message that Jesus wanted his disciples to believe and preach. But it was not easy for them to accept. The first time Jesus gave them this message they strongly rejected it. Jesus hinted at it again after his Transfiguration (Mt 17:12), and then foretold it plainly once more while they were in Galilee (17:22-23). That time the disciples were filled with grief, for the reality of it began to penetrate their hearts. Jesus taught the gospel again and again until his disciples accepted it. The gospel, the message of the cross, is like a two-sided coin. One side says, "All have sinned....," and the other, "justified freely by God's grace through the cross of Christ." To those who are confident of their righteousness, this message strongly rebukes their pride. But to those who are crushed under the burden of sin - this is

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the message of salvation. We must proclaim this message repeatedly. Dr. Billy Graham, as a young man, once spoke to a stadium full of people in a very dynamic way. But afterward he felt something was wrong. So he asked a respected elder, “What was wrong with my message?” The reply: “Billy, you didn't proclaim the cross of Christ.” Since then, Dr. Graham always made the message of the cross the central point of his preaching. This is one reason why God has used him so greatly. Let's remember the cross of Jesus, which set us free from sin. Let's stand in the grace of the cross, and proclaim the cross to the young people on our campuses at every opportunity.

II. Jesus taught his disciples to serve and to give (20-28)

How did the disciples respond to Jesus' message of the cross? There is nothing recorded. Maybe they were silently resisting. In any case, it is clear through the following event that they did not accept his words. It is also clear that what they needed most was to accept the message of the cross.

Look at verses 20-21. The mother of Zebedee's sons, James and John, came to Jesus. She knelt before him like a subject before her king, requesting permission to speak. **“What is it you want?”** Jesus 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.”** Sitting at Jesus' right or left implied the positions of power and privilege in his kingdom. This woman was boldly requesting these positions for her sons. We can understand her as a mother. Generally, mothers are not objective regarding their own children. They want their children to be the best and to have all the best privileges even at the cost of others. She did not say which one should be at the right or at the left - she did not want to show favoritism which would alienate one of them. But she was very clear that both of them should be most honored in Jesus' kingdom.

In his response, Jesus addresses not only the mother, but her sons, James and John too. Obviously, they shared their mother's desire. Actually, they had already been highly favored by Jesus. They were included among the top three disciples, together with Peter. They had the privilege of seeing Jesus raise Jairus' daughter to

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life, and of seeing Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain (Mk 5:37; Mt 17:1). But this was not enough for them. They were not satisfied with positions 2 and 3, they wanted positions 1 and 2, even if it meant pushing Peter aside. At the root was their hidden selfish ambition. This is not only their problem, but the problem of all fallen men. It is the temptation to seize power for its own sake. Many think of power as a kind of savior. They think that if only they can get the top position they can have real security and the freedom to do what they want and that they will be happy. This is an illusion. J.R.R. Tolkien's classic trilogy, "The Lord of the Rings," presents the temptation to power in the form of a ring that passes through the hands of various people. In fact, they are tested by the temptation to power. Those who overcame found peace and meaning in carrying out their own given tasks as role players in the greater drama. But those who fell into the temptation became slaves of the lust for power and were wicked and insecure. Power plays motivated by selfish ambition destroy Christian communities. A beautiful fellowship can be hurt, badly damaged, and even divided when selfish ambition arises in its midst.

How did Jesus deal with his two disciples? He did not rebuke them. Rather, he tried to help them raise their level of spirituality. He taught them to consider suffering as well as glory. He said, **"Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"** (22) Jesus' cup was to suffer and die in shame and pain for the sin of the world. Jesus indicates that top positions are not given because one asks; they follow suffering. The desire for glory is not bad, but it should be enlightened by awareness that suffering is involved. So Jesus challenged James and John to participate in his suffering by drinking his cup. They said, **"We can."** Their answer revealed their great faith and trust in Jesus and their willingness to suffer. They were indeed great men. Their passion must have encouraged Jesus. Jesus promised that they would share in his sufferings. James became the first apostolic martyr (Ac 12), and John was exiled on Patmos for his faith (Rev 1). Some people desire leadership positions. Thank God for such people. But let's remember that such positions are accompanied by suffering. This helps temper selfish ambition.

Jesus also taught James and John to respect the Father's sovereign purpose in regard to places in the kingdom. The Father alone decides who receives them,

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for his own purpose and glory. In this sense, James and John were acting like boorish guests at a dinner banquet. They ignored the host's intention in assigning places for each of his guests. In fact, they were blinded to the presence and purpose of our Father God. Selfish ambition can blind people to God and his purpose. Jesus helped them to see our Father God. We must remember that we are admitted to the kingdom, not to satisfy our ambition, but by God's grace, for his purpose.

James and John did not receive the places they had asked for. But they did agree to participate in Jesus' sufferings. In this way Jesus taught them a right attitude toward God. We should not try to use God for our purpose, but seek to fulfill God's purpose--even through much suffering. Now James and John also had to face the other ten disciples, who were all indignant. It was because each one felt he had a legitimate chance to be number one among them all. They thought that James and John had cheated by enlisting their mother. They wanted the matter decided based on their performance, not by means of a political maneuver through their mothers. Now, they wanted to vote James and John out of their company. It was a crisis. How did Jesus help his disciples? Jesus called them together and taught two things.

First, his disciples must not be like worldly rulers. He 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.”** World systems, be they the Roman Republic or American democratic capitalism are all based on applied power. Those in positions of power - whether economic, social, political, military or intellectual-- use their power to coerce others to do their bidding. Those who want to keep their jobs must satisfy their boss. These days many employees tremble before their bosses as though their lives depend on their paychecks. In the world, having and using coercive authority is the norm. However, Jesus' workers must be different. Although the disciples had grown up in a society that imbued them with a worldly mindset, they needed to change. Before trusting them with kingdom authority, Jesus trains his people so they will not use coercion like worldly rulers.

Second, the disciples should learn of Jesus in serving and giving. In verses 26-27, Jesus taught his disciples that the great one is the one who serves, and that the

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one who is first must be the slave of all. This is a paradoxical truth. It does not mean that because one belongs to the servant class in this world he will automatically become a great ruler in God's kingdom. Rather, Jesus was teaching his disciples the secret to being used greatly by God. It is to have a servant's mindset and a life-giving spirit. This is quite opposite of selfish ambition. Instead of seeking one's own benefit or glory, it means seeking to please and glorify God. It is emptying oneself in order to do what God desires. It is denying oneself in order to be a blessing to others.

Jesus did not teach his disciples with words alone, he also set the example for them. Let's read 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."** As the Son of Man, the glorious Messiah, Jesus is worthy of all honor and glory and praise. It is right for him to be served by mankind. But Jesus knew that people were unable to serve him. People were too wounded and broken and spiritually sick with sin. Jesus knew that before people could serve him, he had to serve them. So he took the initiative to heal the sick, drive out demons, and plant the word of God in thirsty souls. As just one of many examples, Jesus once went into a synagogue on the Sabbath day. He saw a man with a shriveled hand. Jesus knew that the religious leaders would persecute him if he tried to help the man. But he did so anyway, telling him, **"Stretch out your hand."** When the man did so, his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Jesus gave his life to help one crippled man. This spirit marked Jesus' life and ministry. Finally Jesus went to the cross, where he offered his life as a ransom for us. Jesus set us free from bondage to sin and the devil and enabled us to serve God in holiness and righteousness.

Jesus wanted his disciples to learn his attitude in serving each other and those in need. This kind of servant's attitude stems from genuine humbleness. In Philippians 2:6-8, St. Paul described Jesus' mindset with phrases like, **"...he made himself nothing...taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death--even death on a cross."** When we as individuals, and as a Christian community, imitate Jesus in serving and giving, God can use us greatly to build up a beautiful ministry by helping one person at a time. This

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serving attitude of Christ has been at the heart of Chicago UBF ministry, as we learned from the example of Dr. Samuel Lee. Dr. Lee spent his time and passion to care for needy young students one by one with willingness to sacrifice. While we were preparing for an international conference about 20 years ago, a young girl student in Chicago UBF was tempted through evil people who tried to plant doubt and fear in her heart. Dr. Lee was so intent on helping this one person overcome the devil's mischief that he decided to cancel the entire conference if it would help her. He did not mind the discredit that would come from around the world if he could help one person to be freed from the devil's trap. Such stories are numerous in our church history.

Some people are willing to serve their own Bible students with a life-giving spirit. But they do not want to serve their coworkers in the same way. Some leaders are willing to sacrifice for their own members, but not for other leaders. Jesus' focus in this passage is on helping his disciples to serve and give for one another. In the long run, unity among leaders is more important than serving a few Bible students all by oneself.

Then there are other people who are willing to serve sacrificially in the church, but they treat their family members with disregard. There is a beautiful story of a man of God who sacrificed his ministry to care for his wife. He is J. Robertson McQuilkin. After serving for twelve years in Japan as a missionary, he became the third president of Columbia International University in South Carolina from 1968 to 1990. He had a distinguished ministry and participated in sending thousands of missionaries. But at the height of his ministry success, his wife Muriel began to suffer from Alzheimer's disease. At that time, McQuilkin resigned from his ministry position to devote himself to caring for her full time.

We know that the hidden selfish ambition within us is dangerous. We want to learn of Jesus who came to serve and to give his life. But how can we change? We can learn from St. Paul. He was once a man of selfish ambition. He studied hard to become a Pharisee, denying himself in many ways. But he was spiritually blind. Thinking he was serving God, he was actually trying to destroy the Christian church. Then the Risen Christ visited him personally. Something like scales fell

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from his eyes and he could see God in Christ and he could find himself as a terrible sinner. He repented daily and constantly. In Galatians 2:20 he could say, **“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”** May the Lord help us all to repent our selfish ambition and learn to serve and give like Jesus.

III. Jesus heals two blind men (29-34)

In the last event in this passage, Matthew seems to contrast two blind men with his two ambitious disciples. We can learn from the blind men how to obtain the mercy of the Messiah.

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the roadside. They were helpless and pitiful. They seemed to be the least important people on the scene. But surprisingly, when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, **“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”** It was the power of faith welling up in their souls. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah and that he could heal them. People in the crowd were not happy about the shouting and said, “Hey, you guys, be quiet!” If these blind men had been sensitive to public opinion they would have given up. But when faced with resistance, the power of faith in their souls propelled them all the more to cry out to Jesus, **“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”** We can learn from them how to cry out for the Messiah’s mercy. They had nothing to offer Jesus. But they believed that God hears the cry for mercy of those in need. Jesus stopped and called them, asking, **“What do you want me to do for you?”** It was their moment to have the Messiah’s ear. What did they ask for? They said, **“Lord, we want our sight.”** It was what they really needed. Their request did not come from vanity, greed, or selfish ambition, but from their need. Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him (34).

Selfish ambition blinds us to God and his good purpose to use us to serve people in need. It can make great people dangerous and useless to God. But Jesus heals us. Jesus cleanses our hearts and opens our eyes to God those in need. As we

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serve and give our lives like Jesus did, we can be happy and form a healthy Christian community. Let's cry out for Jesus' mercy.