

The Incarnate Servant

Matthew 20:17-28

Over and over again one theme is repeated throughout Jesus' ministry. Greatness. Importance. "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And that wasn't a debate among the Pharisees, but rather among Jesus' own disciples. It is such a common trait of the fallen human mind, not something that tempts only the most notoriously wicked. It tempts all of us. The pursuit of importance. The ranking of importance. The pecking order. The chain of command. We all experience it in this world in some way or another, and so much human conflict and harm is caused by this seemingly unending competition. Men, and women, vying for the top position, the top honor, the top degree of recognition and praise.

We all want it, at least in the flesh of the fallen nature. No doubt the remnant of that old man continues to plague us all in some way, even as it plagued the disciples. And in our text today, it surfaces in what is, to me, a particularly unfortunate way. It was not James and John who came to Jesus themselves, but their mother! So here are these two men, seeking greatness, as if that pursuit wasn't bad enough, they sent their mother to Jesus to speak for them.

That the brothers themselves were involved in this is made clear in,

Mark 10:35 "And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Since both accounts must be true and without error, the

conclusion is that they were all involved. The mother spoke to Jesus, as we read here in Matthew. But she was clearly speaking for James and John, so much so that Mark doesn't even mention her. It was,

I. AN INAPPROPRIATE PURSUIT OF IMPORTANCE.

It is worth noting that Jesus had called these two disciples, the Sons of Thunder. In the list of disciples we read,

Mark 3:17 "James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder."

One dictionary suggests that, "The name seems to denote fiery and destructive zeal that may be likened to a thunder storm." Sons of thunder. And thunder represents power, doesn't it? Thunder expresses power, and authority. Dominance and control. Jesus certainly knew their heart! Here is their thunder. It is the bold and arrogant request for a place of prominence, to sit at Jesus right hand and at his left.

What is so utterly wrong about that is that it contradicts the very definition of discipleship which Jesus has taught.

Mat. 10:38 "And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Mat. 16:24 "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

So the essence of biblical discipleship is self-denial. The essence of godliness is the humility of self-denial. The essence of spiritual maturity is the willingness and commitment to lose your life for the sake of Jesus. In other words, Jesus is important,

not you. Jesus is exalted, not you. Jesus is prominent, not you.

John the Baptist understood that.

John 3:28 “You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.” 31 He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.”

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” That’s godliness, my friends. And so these two brothers are guilty of submitting,

A. A request for special privileges, rather than self-denial.

Special privileges. We all like that idea, don’t we? Special treatment. It makes it easier for us. It makes it more enjoyable for us. It makes it more fun and exciting. Special privileges. But not for Jesus. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Here is the amazing point. Jesus had special privileges himself! After all, he was God! He had full equality with God the Father. He was the Word which became flesh. He was the second person of the Trinity. For example, do you remember when Peter tried to defend Jesus with a sword?

Mat. 26:51 “And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels.”

Jesus had special privileges! He could call twelve legions of angels at his own command! But, of course, he didn’t. And that’s the point. According to Philippians 2:5, Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.” Now, that doesn’t mean he gave up his deity. That doesn’t mean that he emptied himself of his divine nature. But rather this, he emptied himself of the exercise of his power and authority. He emptied himself of the rights and privileges he possessed as God. He didn’t exercise his rights. He didn’t accept special privileges. Instead, he became a servant. First of all, he became a man. He took upon himself human flesh. And he submitted himself to all the obligations of that humanity, and to all its infirmities. He became obedient, even unto death.

So here, to the contrary, are James and John, requesting special privileges for themselves. And prominence. This was so inappropriate.

B. A request for prominence, rather than humility.

They wanted to be first! But isn’t that something Jesus just taught about?

Mat. 20:16 “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

That’s what they missed! That’s how they sinned. They wanted their own prominence. They wanted to be first among the disciples. They wanted to be the most important. They wanted all the special privileges that came along with that.

v.20-21

Jesus is very gracious in his response, because he doesn’t condemn them! In one sense, he could have responded by noting how utterly inconsistent the request is with true discipleship and that they had entirely missed the mark! If this pursuit of

importance was prominent, if it was the determining characteristic of their lives, then they would be disqualified from the kingdom altogether.

But that is not how Jesus' reaction, not in the form of a condemnation. But Jesus' response was a rebuke.

v.22 "Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking."

All things considered, that is a rather mild rebuke. Followed by a personal challenge.

v.22 "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink."

"The cup" certainly refers to the fullness of Jesus' suffering, unto death. "The cup" would refer to all the trials and persecution he would endure in his humiliation at the hands of sinful men. The cup would also refer to the terrible justice and wrath of God which would be poured out upon him, so much so that he would cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That's the cup. "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink."

James and John give an amazing answer. They say, "Yes."

v.22 They said to him, "We are able."

Jesus then gives them a rebuke which I am quite sure they didn't fully understand then, even though they would come to understand it very well.

v.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."

"You will drink my cup." You will suffer, and die, even as I do. You will be persecuted. You will be in distress. You will lose your life in every way possible. Still, Jesus says by way of rebuke, you

won't get any special privileges or honor.

v.23 "...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."

Thus,

II. A REBUKE TO THE OVERCONFIDENT.

It is worth noting that the other disciples don't come across too well either, for we read of their own apparent jealousy and indignant spirit in,

v.24 "And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers."

They probably wanted those positions for themselves! How dangerous is that condition of overconfidence.

A. The arrogance of claiming self-sufficiency.

"We are able..." How often does that same sense of self-sufficiency creep into our hearts and minds. And how vulnerable we become, because what self-sufficiency does is rob you of any initiative to trust God! So you don't pray, or you pray very little. You trust in your own wisdom, rather than the wisdom of the word of God. You look to yourself for your strength instead of looking to God in your weakness. I can do it! I can manage.

Think about Peter's example in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Mat. 26:33 "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." 35 Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same."

So what happened? Three times as he prayed Jesus came to

the disciples only to find them sleeping. So they had to learn the hard way. Jesus said to them,

Mat. 26:40 “So, could you not watch with me one hour? 41 Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Then we read this,

Mat. 26:69 “Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” 70 But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.” 71 And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” 72 And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.” 73 After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” 74 Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.”

Those are dangerous words, “We are able...” It is a dangerous condition for your soul if you think yourself to be self-sufficient. Or if you act as if you are self-sufficient. It is a spirit of such great arrogance. Along with,

B. The arrogance of claiming authority.

Again, that’s so amazing, that James and John would request this position of authority, sitting at the two sides of God in heaven. That position was not Jesus’ to give, and no man would occupy such prominence and preeminence over all others. It was wrong to request such authority. It was an insult to Jesus as well, to the preeminence of his authority.

Something else at this point is worth noting for your encouragement. This position of authority, to sit at Jesus’ right hand, is actually granted to the church as whole. Not to any person, individually. Not in any sense of granting rank and prominence among men. But the church as a whole does have that authority which is represented by that position. Paul describes,

Eph. 1:19 “...the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.”

He then brings into focus the church.

Eph. 1:22 “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

It gets even more specific in,

Eph. 2:4 “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

So we are already there, seated with Jesus, in a position of authority, for Jesus is head over all things for the sake of the church. And when he returns, we will return with him, in triumph and judgment. What is so wrong is that this claim of authority is actually our right and privilege together as a church. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, even now, in the realm of spiritual reality. And that is the context for Jesus’ definition of,

III. A PROPER ALTERNATIVE FOR GREATNESS.

It is so easy to define, because Jesus defines it.

Mat. 23:11 “The greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

More fully, we read,

Luke 22:24 “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. 27 For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”

So here is greatness. The one who serves. And Jesus defines what is often called servant-leadership.

A. Jesus defines servant-leadership.

v.25

That’s the bad example. The words well translated “lord it over” and “exercise authority” refer to the abuse of power, the abuse of authority. Leadership that is overbearing, domineering. Bullies have no place in leadership. Neither those who are violent, strong-willed or quick-tempered. Servant-leaders do not lord it over their subjects. They lead them, to be sure, but they do so as servants.

That principle and definition of servant-leadership comes down to practical applications in the church, as well.

1 Peter 5:1 “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a

partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

The Bible gives restraint to those in authority, because of the propensity of the fallen, sinful human heart. “Exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly... eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

Servant-leadership does not require domineering! Servant-leadership does not require the heavy hand of oppression. It requires the heart of a servant, the heart of one willing to be an example to the flock.

Jesus defines such leadership. And he embodies it!

B. Jesus embodies servant-leadership.

v.28

Jesus did not come to be served. He did not come to gain advantage or privilege for himself. Rather, he came to give up those things. To serve, in the most intense and extreme way. He would give up his life. With a specific purpose, of course, as a ransom. To satisfy the punishment of the wrath of God which our sins deserve.

Isn’t that what he has been repeatedly trying to teach his disciples? Go back to,

v.17-19

Explicit instruction and revelation. Explicit teaching that so

clearly defines the whole of the gospel. Jesus would be crucified, put to death. He will be mocked and flogged in the process, totally and completely humiliated, culmination the humiliation of the whole of his life. And he would submit to that torture so that he could be raised from the dead on the third day, triumphing over death in accomplishing for us our eternal salvation.

He lived it out, this idea of servant-leadership. Going back to Philippians 2, which speaks of Jesus,

Phil. 2:6 "...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."

That's the model, dear friends.

Phil. 2:1 "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."

Jesus defines greatness! Jesus defines leadership.

v.28 "...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

As you celebrate Christmas this year, it is this Jesus whom I proclaim to you, this servant-leader, this one who was born to be a servant. He was born, incarnate, in order to obey his father's will in giving up his life for his beloved sheep, those whom the father had given him.

There are a lot of trappings that surround Christmas in these days, lots of distractions provided by the world. And lots of people wanting to do away with any reference to Jesus at all. So this morning I preach Jesus to you, Jesus the son of God, who was born and became a man in order to be your servant. And he accomplished that purpose by suffering. So I preach to you not a little baby in a manger but a suffering servant, the lamb of God, who came to take away the sin of the world.

Is. 53:3 "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."