

Discipleship: Serve
Matthew 20:25-28
Sunday, October 4, 2026

This is the second week in our sermon series on Discipleship. If you were with us last week, you'll remember we talked about how we are ALL called to be Jesus' disciples. How the idea behind discipleship is that we should seek first the Kingdom of God. And how we seek that kingdom is by seeking to actually follow Jesus—to be like him. That's Discipleship: not just claiming to be saved and calling it a day, but seeking to become more like Jesus; to do the kinds of things he did.

But, as we also talked about last week, we can't make that happen on our own. We can't just try harder to do better. That never works. To become like Jesus takes transformation. And that transformation takes the Holy Spirit. When we come to faith in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit and from that moment forward, if we'll just work with it, the Spirit works with us and in us to transform us to be more like Jesus.

And so, in today's scripture, we see a critical part of what it looks like to live like Jesus; what it looks like to be transformed into his image: service. But at the same time, we also see how serving like Jesus served requires transformation.

The context behind today's scripture is this: the mother of Jesus' disciples James and John has just come to ask Jesus to let her boys sit at Jesus' right and left hand when he comes into his kingdom. In other words, when he's kicked the Romans out of Palestine and taken over as the new head honcho, she asks that he raise James and John to positions of power and prestige; make them his first and second in command.

Now, in the culture of that day, this was a perfectly understandable request. That culture was characterized by what's known as patron/client relationships. To be successful in that culture, a person would need to find themselves a patron ... someone to sponsor them, help them out as they sought to climb the ladder of success. The client would serve the patron in order to move up the ladder and, when the client finally got towards the top, they might be able to be someone else's patron. In other words, the idea was to serve if you had to, but only so you could eventually get to the point where you could BE served.

And that's what James and John's mom is asking Jesus to do for her sons. To be their patron; to raise them up to positions where they would no longer need to serve; where they could be large and in charge, with servants of their own. That's how the patron/client system worked.

But it isn't how discipleship works. It isn't how following Jesus works.

Because Jesus served. Instead of making the people come to him, he went to them, travelling the hot and dusty roads of Galilee on foot. And wherever Jesus went, he taught the people. Not just his disciples, as other Rabbis did, but anyone who wanted to hear him. He healed them—blindness, leprosy, bleeding. He cast out their demons. He even raised some of them from the dead. He dedicated his ministry not to his own comfort, safety, security, or wealth, but to others, bringing *them* healing, wholeness, and comfort. Jesus served.

Now, I want you to think about that for a second based on what we know about him from reading the Gospels. According to John's Gospel, he's the Word made flesh. The incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. God incarnate. According to the culture he

lived in, he should have been living in an ornate palace with hundreds of servants to meet his every need.

But he wasn't. Instead, Jesus served.

The disciples should have seen this. They had spent the better part of three years with him. Yet, because of the cultural assumptions they carried around with them, they had been so focused on what Jesus could do for *them*, they failed to pay attention to what Jesus was *actually* doing. They failed to recognize that Jesus' very nature—and by extension, God's very nature, was service ... and that following Jesus would therefore require service.

Now, if I were Jesus and something like this happened after 3 years of almost continual contact, I would probably have been like, "Really? How clueless are you idiots?" But that isn't how Jesus responded. He knew that enabling his disciples to reject the cultural assumptions they had spent their whole lives living by was only possible with divine assistance. And Jesus knew that that divine assistance wasn't going to happen until after he had left them; until they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

So, in today's scripture, rather than yelling at them, he teaches them what he has been demonstrating for them from the beginning. He knows it won't fully sink in until they receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but he wants it to be there when they do. He explains how he, the Son of Man, God's son, the ultimate king, came not to be served but to serve. Not to accumulate power and position and riches for himself, but, as Paul says in chapter 2 of his letter to the Philippians, to pour himself out, to serve his people, even to the point of death on a cross.

And he goes on to tell his disciples that as his disciples, their job is to be like him. Not to accumulate for themselves power or prestige or riches, but to serve as he served. To pour themselves out as he poured himself out. To bring healing and wholeness and comfort to God's people, just as he did.

And, of course, this isn't just a message for those disciples 2000 years ago. It's also a message for us disciples right now. Just like those first disciples, we are called to follow him. We are called to do the kinds of things he would do if he were in our shoes.

And the reason is simple. When we imitate him, we grow closer to him. Service is a spiritual practice, like worship, study, generosity, and all the others. It opens up space within us for the Holy Spirit to work to transform us so we can be more like Jesus. In other words, as we seek to be like Jesus, we enable the Holy Spirit to *make* us more like Jesus. And when we do that, service goes from being something we try to do because Jesus did it, to becoming a basic part of who we are.