



ARE YOU ABLE TO DRINK THE CUP?



Jesus' Paradigm for Leadership

—Matthew 20:20–28

Context

The **purpose** of Matthew's Gospel is *to present Jesus of Nazareth as the King of the Jews*.

The **literary structure** of Matthew's Gospel is built around *proving Jesus as this King*.

- **2:2** – “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?”
- **27:37** – “This is Jesus the King of the Jews.”

If there is one who can speak on the topic of leadership and authority, it is this King.

Overview

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 20:20–28 provides three lessons for us to understand about leadership in the church:

- I. The Preoccupation of Human Ambition (vv. 20–24)
- II. The Proclamation of a Contrary Agenda (vv. 25–27)
- III. The Precedent of the King's Atonement (v. 28)

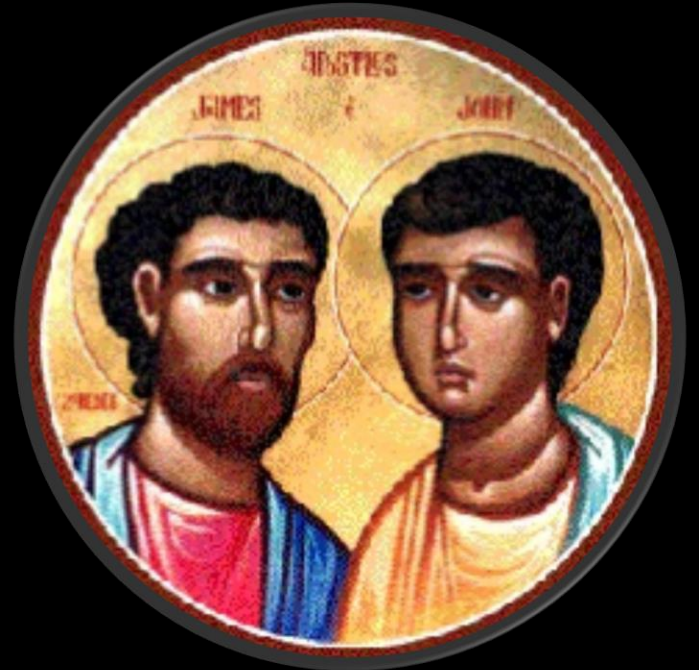
I. The Preoccupation of Human Ambition

A. The Request of a Mother

“Then” the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. And He said to her, ‘What do you wish?’ She said to Him, ‘Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left’” (20:20–21).

- **“Then”** – this event is closely connected to what precedes.
 - **20:18–19** – “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify *Him*, and on the third day He will be raised up. **Then . . .**

- “**The mother** of **the sons of Zebedee** came to Jesus with her sons.”
 - “**The mother**” – probably *Salome*, the sister of Jesus’ mother (compare Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; and John 19:25); one of a small band of women who faithfully followed Jesus.
 - “**the sons of Zebedee**” – James and John, fishermen called by Jesus to be disciples, also known as the “sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17).
 - A family request: Jesus’ *aunt* approaches Jesus on behalf of her sons, Jesus’ *cousins*.



- “**bowing down** and making a request of Him. And He said to her, ‘What do you wish?’”
 - “**bowing down**” – Salome does approach Jesus with a recognition of His authority.
 - Perhaps her two sons were too *cowardly* to ask on their own, in light of Jesus’ teaching on humility.
 - Perhaps her two sons put her up to it, knowing Jesus’ compassion for women.
 - Perhaps they assumed this would be best handled as a family matter.

- “She said to Him, **‘Command that** in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one **on Your right** and one **on Your left.**’”
 - **“Command that . . . !”** – Dispensing with the formalities, Salome now issues a directive.



- The seats **“on the right”** and **“on the left”** were the most distinguished places in a king’s administration.
- The request was a bold attempt to secure greatness, despite Jesus’ previous admonition to “humble oneself” (e.g., Matt 18:1–4).

- But Salome's request was not altogether outlandish.

“Then Peter said to Him, ‘Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.’”

—Matthew 19:27–29

- Salome and her sons failed to understand *the current rejection of the King by Israel*, and *the nature of the era before His final acceptance*.

“But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.” —Matthew 19:30

B. The Response of Jesus

“But Jesus answered, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink **the cup** that I am about to drink?’ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’ He said to them, ‘My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father” (20:22–23).



- “the cup” – Jesus chooses a metaphor to describe what was missing in the disciples’ understanding.
- This OT metaphor could symbolize blessing, judgment, or suffering—here it is *suffering*.

- In other words, Jesus asks, “James and John, are you able *to suffer*?”
- **“We are able”** (δυνάμεθα, *dunametha*) – their simple, brief response further highlights their preoccupation and ignorance.
- **“My cup you shall drink”** – suffering was inescapable; it had been ordained for them.
- **“But to sit on My right and on My left, is not Mine to give . . .”** – future reward is sovereignly determined by the Father, and not something to be obsessed with in the present.
- The cup of suffering thus becomes the metaphor for leadership and authority in the *inter-advent era*—the time between Jesus’ first and second comings.

C. The Reaction of the Disciples

“And hearing this, the ten **became indignant** with the two brothers”
(20:24).

- The rest of the disciples show no self-awareness.
- Rather than repenting of their own obsession with greatness, they turn on James and John in *jealousy*.
- “**became indignant**” – a reaction of strong displeasure, but not over the request itself, but over James’ and John’s jockeying for position.

**The disciples were preoccupied with the ultimate age of glory
with all the status and authority it would bring,
not with the intermediate age and the suffering and humility it
would require.**

They wanted the crown without the cup.

II. The Proclamation of Contrary Agenda

“But Jesus **called them to Himself** and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave’” (20:25–27).

- Revealing that the preoccupation with greatness was common to each of the disciples, Jesus now addresses *all of them*.
- Jesus uses vivid antithetical parallelism to highlight the sharp contrast between the world’s understanding of leadership and His.

A. Jesus' Depiction of Worldly Leadership

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them” (v. 25)

- **“You know that”** – Jesus appeals to common knowledge—life under lost human beings (“Gentiles”) in positions of power.
- **“rulers . . . lord it over”** – “the first ones . . . have mastery over” – an intensive verb emphasizing top-down leadership.
- **“great men exercise authority over”** – another intensive verb, even suggesting the idea of “tyrannize.”



B. Jesus' Prohibition of Worldly Leadership

“It is not this way among you” (v. 26a)

- The statement serves as a *hinge* to Jesus' antithesis.
- In five simple Greek words, Jesus declares that the world's ways—the ambitions and practices innate to sinful flesh—have nothing to do with His program.
- It is not a command or a proposal; it is a simple *fact*.



C. Jesus' Alternative to Worldly Leadership

**“but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,
and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave”
(20:26b–27).**

- Jesus describes His program in exact antithesis to the world's program, forming a literary *chiasm*.
- **“the great . . . shall be your servant”** – the opposite of “exercise authority” (v. 25b); the servant (διάκονος) did things for others rather than for himself.
- **“the first . . . shall be your slave”** – the opposite of “lord it over” (v. 25a); the slave (δοῦλος) was not free to do what he wished, but was bound to obey his master.

You will not sit on a throne; you will wait on tables.

You will not wear a crown; you will wear a towel.

You will not exercise power; you will surrender rights.

III. The Precedent of the King's Atonement

“just as” the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,
and to give His life a ransom for many” (20:28).

- **“just as”** – introduces the basis for the agenda Jesus just described.
- This radical paradigm for leadership would be impossible were it not for the atonement of Christ and what it provides and exemplifies.
- Jesus would not call His disciples to a lifestyle that He Himself—as the author and perfecter of their faith—would not model.
- Jesus articulates this basis through another antithesis.

A. What the King Did Not Come To Do

“the Son of Man did not come to be served . . . ” (20:28).

- **“Son of Man”** – not a title of humility, but of royalty!

“I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.”

—**Daniel 7:13–14 (see Matthew 19:28)**

- The difference between the first and second comings of the Son of Man.

B. What the King Did Came To Do

“... **but to serve, and to give His life** a ransom for many” (20:28).

- “**but**” – a very strong contrasting conjunction.
- The first coming of the King had a two-fold purpose:

TO SERVE

1. “**to serve,**” διακονέω (*diakoneō*) – *lit.*, “to wait on tables”; lowly service—the kind that marked Jesus’ *earthly ministry*.

TO SACRIFICE

2. “**to give His life**” – a metaphor for “to die”; it was not Jesus’ “to give” positions of authority (v. 23), but it was His “to give” (v. 28).

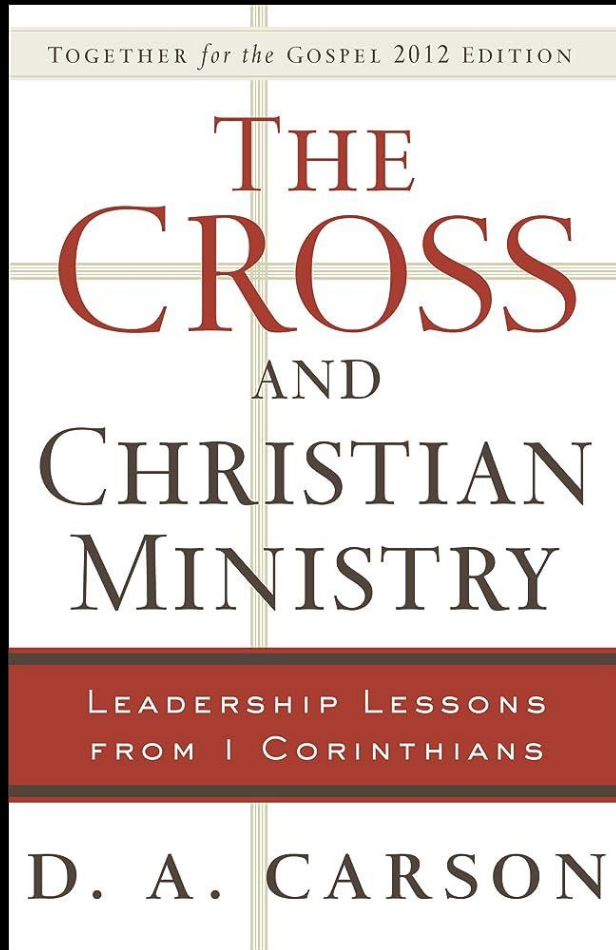
“. . . but to serve, and to give His life **a ransom for many**” (20:28).

- Although Jesus’ service and sacrifice serve as the standard for imitation, what it ultimately accomplished is absolutely unique and once-for-all.
- **“a ransom”** – a term commonly used in antiquity to describe “the price paid for a slave to be set free.”
- **“for”** – the Greek preposition strongly emphasis *substitution* (the life of the Son of man for the lives of slaves).
- **“many”** – not all of mankind, but those who would be ransomed in actuality.

“As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see *it and be satisfied*; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.”

—Isaiah 53:11–12



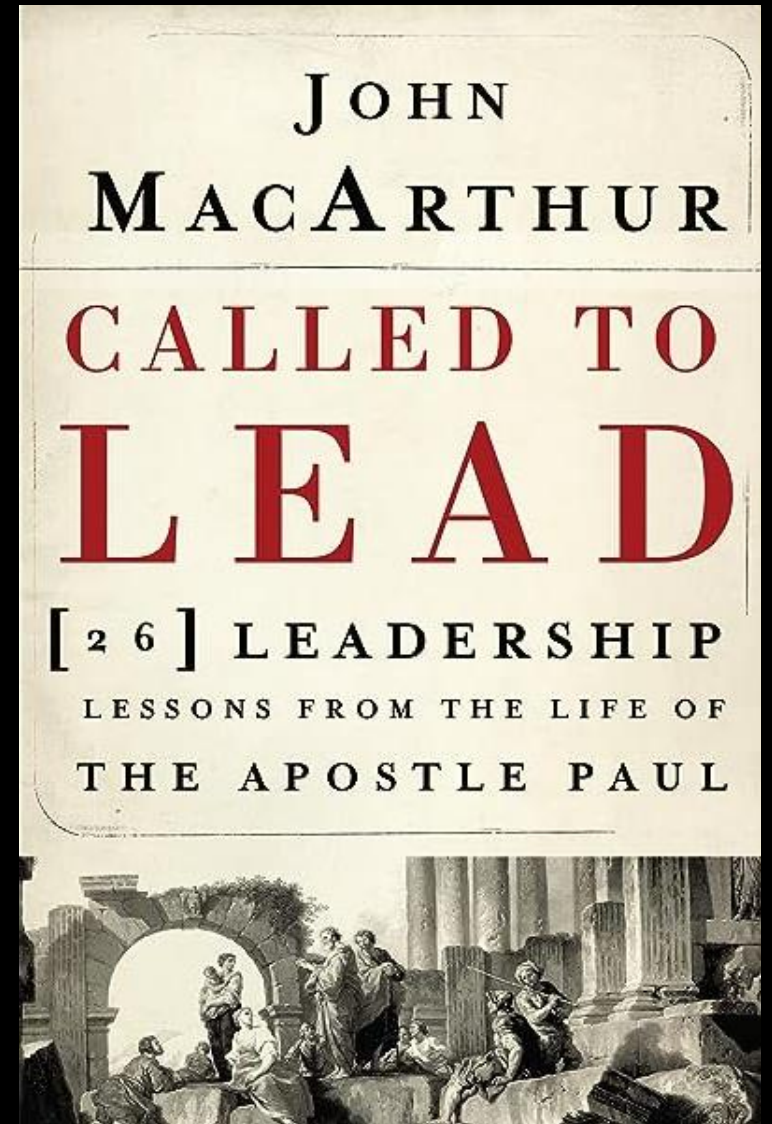


“Most people, at some point or other, dream of themselves becoming great leaders. What do their minds conjure up? Only rarely do those who dream of leadership, but who have never experienced it, think through the responsibilities, pressures, and temptations leaders face. Almost never do they focus on accountability, service, suffering.”

—D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 92–93

“According to Christ, then, the truest kind of leadership demands service, sacrifice, and selflessness. A proud and self-promoting person is not a good leader by Christ’s standard, regardless of how much clout here or she might wield. Leaders who look to Christ as *their* Leader and their supreme model of leadership will have servants’ hearts. They will exemplify sacrifice.”

—John MacArthur, *Called to Lead*, v



Are you able to drink the cup?