



TALKS FOR GROWING CHRISTIANS TRANSCRIPT

Greatness in the Kingdom of God is not Determined by the World's Standards

Matthew 20:17-28

Matthew 20:17-28, "Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, ¹⁸ "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, ¹⁹ and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again."

²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.

²¹ And He said to her, "What do you wish?"

She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom."

²² But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able."

²³ So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."

²⁴ And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Background Notes

The Lord Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem for the last week of His earthly life. The Lord knew what awaited Him in Jerusalem, but He didn't turn away. The Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 50:7 says, "...Therefore I have set My face like a flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed." As the obedient Servant, He was determined to do the Father's will, even though He knew it would involve suffering and death. However, He also knew that He would be vindicated by His resurrection. So the Lord took His disciples aside and explained to them why they were going up to Jerusalem.

This was at least the third time that our Lord announced His coming death to His disciples. Look back at Matthew 16:21-22: "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. ²² Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" Also in Matthew 17:9 we read, "Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus

commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead." And of course, the Lord had announced His death and resurrection, illustrating it with "the sign of Jonah" in Matthew 12:40, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." So the Lord clearly communicated to His disciples what lay ahead and why they were going up to Jerusalem, but the thoughts of the disciples were more about rewards in the kingdom than about our Lord's coming suffering.

Jesus and His disciples were traveling along the Jordan Valley, not far from Jericho (as we see at the end of this chapter). The mother of James and John came to the Lord, and told Him that she would like to make a request (v20, 21). Maybe she was traveling with the extended group of followers and heard the parable about the landowner and laborers. Perhaps she had just arrived from Galilee to join her sons, and they told her about the parable. In any case, her request seems to be based on the teaching of that parable, that there will be rewards in the coming kingdom. The parallel account in Mark 10 tells us that James and John asked their mother to make this request. The other ten disciples were uptight with James and John (v24). The other disciples were probably having the same selfish thoughts, but just didn't voice them! The doctrinal points come from our Lord's answer to James, John and their mother.

Doctrinal Points

1. Rank in the future kingdom is not determined by present request.

Verses 22-23: "But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." ²³ So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."

The "cup" to which our Lord was referring was His coming suffering. When James and John said that they were able to also drink this cup of suffering, the Lord told them that they would indeed drink this cup of suffering. James, as you know, went on to be martyred for the cause of Christ (Acts 12). John was persecuted, and finally exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching and teaching about Jesus.

Notice from our Lord's answer that there will be rank in the coming kingdom. Remember, the "kingdom" mentioned here does not refer to heaven, but to the millennial kingdom that our Lord will set up here on this earth at His second coming. So there will be rank in the coming kingdom. If you're a believer, you will be part of that kingdom, and you will have a specific "rank" in that kingdom. But your future rank and my future rank in that glorious kingdom is not determined by present request. Your rank in the kingdom can't be bought, and it is not won by vote, and it is not granted by prayer requests. It is prepared by God the Father. Rank in the future kingdom is not determined by present request.

2. Rank in the future kingdom is determined by present service.

In His answer, the Lord went on to show that there's a principle involved in God's determination of rank in the kingdom, and that principle was determined in the eternal counsels of God. What is that principle? It is our **service for the Lord now**. Verses 26-

27: "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave..."

God's standard for determining greatness and rank in the kingdom is not the same as the world's standards. The world determines greatness by who has the most power, money and clout, right? Why does the world refer to Alexander the Great and Herod the Great as "Great"? Is it because they were nice, kind unselfish rulers? No! It was because they had the power to carry out their wishes and make a name for themselves.

How different are the standards in God's kingdom! In verses 25-27 Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave..."

Do you want to be great in God's eyes? Then serve the Lord by being willing to serve one another! In verse 28 the Lord taught that He is the perfect model to follow. The Son of Man didn't come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

A short tangent here: it's important to understand the difference between verse 28 and 1 Timothy 2:6, which says that Jesus "gave Himself a ransom for all..." Here in Matthew 20:28 we read, "...give His life a ransom for many." Is "all" in one verse and "many" in the other verse a contradiction in the Bible? No! It might seem so in the English language, but not in the original Greek language. The preposition "for" is different in each verse. In 1 Timothy 2:6, it is *hyper* – on behalf of. He gave Himself a ransom on behalf of all. Here in Matthew 20:28 it is *anti* – in place of, or instead of. He gave His life a ransom "in place of" "instead of" in substitution for many. Both are true of the work of Christ on the cross; He gave Himself on behalf of all, but He gave Himself in place of, or "instead of" or in "substitution for" the many – those who are saved.

This is what is meant by the terms "unlimited atonement" and "limited atonement." The death of Christ on the cross was **unlimited in scope** and provision, but it is **limited in effect** and benefits to those who believe. **He died on behalf of all, but He died in place of those who believe.** His perfect life, which was given as a ransom to redeem mankind from the bondage and slavery and penalty of sin, was **sufficient** for all mankind -- but it is only **effective** for those who believe! I trust that you're a believer. The Lord Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins, but that payment is only effective for you when you become a believer. Don't wait until it's too late!

The wonderful truth of verse 28 is given in the context of our Lord as the supreme example of what it means to serve one another, and what it means to be truly great. Whoever wants to be great must serve as Jesus did -- indeed, he or she must be the servant or slave of all in the body of Christ! Rank in the future kingdom is determined by present service.

Practical Application

Mothers, make the right requests for your children!

Mothers, I know that you pray for your children. What do you pray? What are your requests? I hope you don't ask the Lord to make your children rich and famous and "successful" in this world!

At least the request of the mother of James and John was "in the right ballpark" -- she wanted her sons to be great in Christ's future kingdom. That was certainly better than to request to be rich and famous here on earth, right? But her request was off target. The desire and request of a Christian mother should be that her children would come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior, that they would follow His model of a righteous life, and that they would serve Him by serving the body of Christ in this life.

If you make that request, your priorities are right in line with the Word of God. If your priorities are in line with the Word of God, everything else will fall into its proper place!

Mothers, make the right requests for your children!