

# Matthew 20:17-28

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning. My name is James and I'm on staff team here at St Silas. And let me add my word of welcome to Robbie and others. And if you've joined us for the very first time this morning, a big warm welcome to you.

It's great to have you along and you're in the right place. But before we begin, let me pray. Father, make the book live to us. Show us yourself within your word and show us ourselves and show us our Savior.

Father, make the book live to us. Amen. Well, if you've just joined us, we're in the middle of a little series in the Gospel of Matthew in Sunday mornings here at St Silas.

And Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience and he wants them to understand three main things. Firstly, he wants them to know that Jesus is God's chosen king forever.

And then he wants them to know that Jesus is the true and greater Moses and that his word is reliable. And then finally, he wants them to know that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

[ 1 : 16 ] And so there's great comfort to be drawn from that. And I don't know about you, but one of my lockdown pleasures has been watching the Indiana Jones saga.

And I think my favorite one of the three or four movies or five or whatever they're up to now is Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, where Indiana heads off with his father in search of the Holy Grail.

And the Holy Grail was the cup that Jesus was meant to drink from at the Last Supper. And apparently if you drank from it, you'd live forever.

And sure enough, they find it. And in order to get to the cup, they need to go through a series of trials. And the first one is really this big swinging axe thing that kind of decapitates anyone who goes in there.

And so Indiana bravely steps into this trial. And the clue for the trial is that the penitent man kneels before his God.

[ 2 : 21 ] And Indiana, who's a roughish, roguish rogue, keeps on muttering this. And then he remembers the penitent man kneels. And he kneels at the crucial point.

And the axe swings over his head. And he carries on. And he can get this cup, the Holy Grail. And the great struggle that we have in life and that Matthew focuses on in these chapters 19 to 21 is pride, that inability to kneel before our heavenly Father.

And so throughout the Gospel of Matthew, there's this repeated refrain that the greatest among you will be your servant. And again, for those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

And those who humble themselves will be exalted. And for many ideas, that idea of a suffering servant, Messiah or king, was at odds with the expectation of the Jews and of Jesus' own disciples at the time.

You see, the Jews and religious authorities of Jesus' day, they wanted a king who would overthrow the Romans and put them in charge. Jesus' disciples, for that matter, imagined that Jesus was going up to Jerusalem and that there he'd be crowned king of the Jews and that there all of them would get seats as rulers over the people, over the Israelites.

[ 3 : 48 ] And the message of this passage is that if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven and live forever, then we must give up our pride and humble ourselves.

And so Dick France, one of the commentators on this passage, puts it, the natural human concern with status and importance is clearly one of the most fundamental instincts with which must be unlearned by those who belong to God's kingdom.

And the reason that we are instructed to give up on our pride in this passage is because that is what our king has done for us.

And we see that in the key verse for this passage that we're really going to zoom in on. And that is, whoever wants to be first must be your slave. And then verse 28, And so our way into this passage this morning is we're really going to follow the paragraph breaks there, now, then, and when. So 17, 20, and 24. And we're going to consider the cross in verses 17 to 19. Then we're going to look at the cup, verses 20 to 23.

[ 5 : 19 ] And then we're going to look at the ransom, verses 24 to the end. And so the cross, and the cross here is really the cross of shame and death.

And jumping into the story, we're on the way to Jerusalem. Throughout the gospel, Matthew has been painting this picture of Jesus going to Jerusalem.

And they're getting nearer and nearer the whole time. And here they are, just outside Jericho. And they're on the way to Jerusalem. They're almost there to that place.

And they're going to Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples, at a time when everyone would be celebrating the Jewish Passover in Jerusalem. And so the way to Jerusalem is packed, thronged with crowds.

It's as if you could imagine a great highway going to a coastal resort. And it's packed with cars on the way. Kids screaming, donkeys bleating, all that kind of thing.

[ 6 : 19 ] And so Jesus, as he goes, he pulls his disciples to one side of the road and has a private moment with them. And he wants to remind them of what is going to happen in Jerusalem.

And so he says, we're going up to Jerusalem. And there the Son of Man, that's him, will be delivered over to the chief priests and teachers of the law. And they'll condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.

And he's mentioned this already in Jerusalem before in Matthew's Gospel, that he is going to die in Jerusalem. But here he brings out a couple of new details.

And the first is that in Jerusalem, he is going to be mocked and flogged, not by Jewish authorities, but by the Gentiles. And that is that this Jewish Messiah, this Jewish king, is going to die a humiliating death by those who are unclean and outside of God's people.

And a Jewish person hearing that might think that's outrageous, absolutely outrageous. Why would God allow his king to suffer that? They imagine that the king would overthrow the Gentiles, not be murdered by them.

[ 7 : 46 ] And so it seems completely the opposite of what they expected. Jesus might seem a bit pathetic at this point, a bit uncool. And maybe if you go to soccer practice and you talk about Jesus there, it might be the kind of reaction that you might get from your friends there.

Or the way the girls at netball in the netball locker room might speak about Jesus, those who don't follow Jesus as something to be mocked, someone to be mocked and ridiculed.

But the second thing that Matthew adds here, the second detail, I wonder if you spotted it, comes at the very start of verse 18. In the first word there, we are going up to Jerusalem.

So time and again in Matthew's Gospel in 10.38 and 16.12, Jesus has been speaking about going to Jerusalem as I am going to Jerusalem.

But here, it is we. And so what he is saying is that we, as his disciples, are going to be included in his death and humiliation and shame.

[ 8 : 54 ] And why? How is it that I am included in that shame and humiliation? Well, if you are anything like me, to my great shame, it is my sins that place Jesus on that cross.

And to confess and follow Jesus in this life time and time again is a shameful and dishonorable thing for us to do.

It is the kind of thing that our friends might mock us for. And this idea of this humble saviour who is going to be mocked by the Gentiles is such a shock to his disciples that they do not really get it.

That they do not actually twig what Jesus is saying here. And what they thought would happen when they got to Jerusalem was that Jesus was going to be enthroned as the king in David's line forever.

And so they start jockeying for position, trying to figure out who is going to be the minister of defense or who is going to be the home secretary or the foreign secretary or that kind of thing.

[ 10 : 03 ] They do not expect that Jesus is going there to die a shameful death on a cross. And the reason for that is because of the cup that Jesus must drink.

And that brings us to our second point there, the cup, in verses 20 to 23. And the cup there is the cup of God's wrath.

And so we're picking up in verse 20. Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. And it looks incredibly flattering acknowledging him. But look at what she asks. Well, firstly, look at what Jesus says to her. He says, what is it you want? She could ask for anything in the world.

And what does she ask for? She said, grant that one of these two of my sons may sit on your right and the other on your left in your kingdom. She asks for status and position.

[11:06] None of the commentators are particularly clear why it is that Matthew mentions that it's Zebedee's wife here. But what is clear is that this little section is laden with irony.

You see, the next time that Matthew is going to speak about someone being on the left and on the right of Jesus is on the cross where the two rebels are crucified, one on his left and one on his right. And in the Old Testament, sometimes the cup, when we speak about a cup in the Old Testament, sometimes it is an image for God's blessing or the destiny that you're going to receive.

But more often, it's the cup of God's wrath of judgment that someone is going to drink from. And so Jesus responds to this reply by saying, Can you drink?

You don't know what you're asking. Verse 22, Jesus said to them, Can you drink the cup that I'm going to drink? He asks them. And James and John, they think that they're going to be enthroned.

[12:18] They think they're on the verge of greatness. And so they think that they're drinking from the cup of blessing. And so they say, Of course we can. That's why we're here.

And the thing is, they're right. You see, earlier in chapter 19, verse 28, Jesus had promised them that his 12 disciples would sit on 12 thrones, at judging the nation of Israel.

But that was only going to come after he had drunk the cup of God's wrath. But although they answer in the affirmative, Jesus affirms that they will indeed drink from the cup that he drinks.

But not in the same way. You see, they won't suffer for sins in the same way that Jesus does. And they won't receive the ultimate glory that Jesus does.

But a little later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples, they finally get to Jerusalem. And they're celebrating the Passover meal. And during the meal, Jesus picks up a cup.

[13:27] And picking up in chapter 26, verse 27, he says, When he took the cup, he gave thanks. And he gave it to them, saying, Drink from it, all of you.

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. What? For the forgiveness of sins. And so they do indeed drink from the cup that Jesus drinks from.

And in that, they are invited to remember the sacrifice that Jesus makes for them in dying for their sins.

And they are invited to join in suffering with Jesus in this life.

And so a little later in the book of Acts, we read how James is indeed crucified for following Jesus. And then by tradition, we understand that John dies in exile as an old man on the island of Patmos for preaching the word of God.

[14:36] But back in chapter 20, in verse 23, Jesus then says something very surprising. So just turn down and look at verse 23 again. Jesus said to them, You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right and my left is not for me to grant.

These places belong to those whom they have been prepared for by my Father. And I think what Jesus is saying here is that even within the eternity of the Trinity, there isn't a lording over one another.

There isn't a one-upmanship within the Godhead in this little glimpse into the Godhead that we get here. But there is a service and a humility of the other.

And that's the fabric of heaven, and that's what that kingdom is going to look like. And we're invited to join in that serving of one another. You see, Jesus here, he's not saying that he's any less God because he doesn't know who's going to sit at his left and his right.

He isn't saying that he isn't fully God. But what he is saying is that even in the Godhead, there is equal honor, equally Godness between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[15:57] But there is an order in which the Son serves the Father, and the Father loves the Son by glorifying him.

And the thing that makes the Father the Father is that he is always the Father. And the thing that makes the Son the Son is that he is always for eternity the Son.

And the issue is that is at the heart of this passage, is that when we take God's glory for ourselves in our pride, that's the most sinful thing that we could do.

And it's really at the heart of all sins. And so that brings us to our third point, our final point there, the ransom, looking at verses 24 to 28.

And the ransom there is the ransom that is paid for the forgiveness of sins. And the disciples, they find out about this request, and look how they respond in verse 24.

[17:02] When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. And they're absolutely outraged that James and John have asked this through their mother.

And it really is the low point of the gospel. You see, Jesus has just told them about his death in the most graphic of terms, about how humiliating and shameful it is going to be.

And they're on the way to the death. It is imminent. And his closest disciples start bickering about who will rule over whom in his kingdom.

It's like going to a family funeral and maybe a dear relative. And as soon as the funeral finished and you've gone for tea and cake or a wake or however you celebrate, and a punch-up starts as relatives start fighting out about the inheritance.

And the disciples really, in their response here, we see a glimpse into the hardness of the human heart and the desperate sinfulness of sin and why it needs and why it is so shocking and appalling to God.

[18:19] And the disciples, they've missed the entire point of Jesus' death and what his kingdom will be like. That his kingdom is the upside-down kingdom where the first will be last and the last will be first and where the greatest are the servants.

And it's a kingdom that is completely the opposite of what our world looks like today and what the world looked like at that time in Jesus' day. Nothing much has changed.

So we pick it up in verse 25. And Jesus called them together. And he wants to answer this question once and for all. You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with you. And the word there for lording it over is really pushing down the other, exercising authority. It's pushing them down.

It's for no slip of the tongue that we call it a pecking order. It's literally a pecking down, a pushing down. And it's something, this pushing down of someone else in our pride, that is all over society.

[19:34] And it comes up everywhere. So here's France again, speaking of human rulers today and human folk today who lord it over others.

They use their position at the top to bear down on those below them in the social scale. And this natural human pecking order is found not only amongst the great and the good, but at all levels of society, in the school playground, at the workplace, and even within the family.

And so Jesus says here that his kingdom will not be like this. If you want to be somebody in his kingdom, then you must make yourself a nobody, because Jesus becomes a nobody for you and me, that we might really be somebody in God's eyes.

Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. He gave his life as a ransom for many.

What an awesome verse. And Jesus says that he is going to die as a ransom there. And a ransom is a price that is paid to free someone from the debt that they owe.

[20:56] And I think we've been slightly ruined by Hollywood, as much as I love action movies. But we've got, ransom has become a bit of a downward, hasn't it?

See, when we think of ransom, we think of money being extorted out of a good person by someone who's really bad. And so we think of the movie Taken, or we think of John McClane in Die Hard and Nakatomi Plaza, or something like that.

But ransom is really paying a debt for someone else, that someone else has incurred and paid. So classically, Ken Bates, in 1982, he bought the Chelsea Football Club for the princely price of one pound.

And it sounds like an amazingly good deal, football club for one pound. Except in buying it, he was ransoming the club.

Because he took on the debt, that Chelsea Football Club, of one and a half million pounds, that the club. And he ransomed it from its debt.

[22:08] And Jesus says here that he will give his life as a ransom for many, free of charge, for you and for me.

And it's the debt that he is paying as a ransom for our sins. He pours his life out for the forgiveness of sins.

That's the issue. That's the debt. And the particular sin that Jesus has in mind here is of pride and not humbling ourselves, of wanting God's glory for ourselves, of building ourselves up and not humbling ourselves before our God, not kneeling before our heavenly King.

And the message of this passage is that we should give up our pride and humble ourselves and become like servants. That we should be like little children, just as Jesus did.

Even though he was God, he humbled himself and died a humiliating death on the cross and gave his life as a ransom for many.

[ 23 : 20 ] that we may gain the kingdom of heaven. And if you're anything like me, pride is a particular sore point because it manifests itself in the most unlikely of ways.

And I imagine for many of us, it is a particular big issue, even for those of us who don't look particularly prideful. Now, it might be that we've got a great career and we put our pride in that and we secretly cherish that.

It might be that we would rather do things and try and save ourselves, be right with God on our own terms because we're too prideful to accept the sacrifice that Jesus has made.

It might be that we are naturally someone who's very insecure and so we over-inflate ourselves and over-compensate for that. And we forget that Jesus is our champion and that he is the one that we should honour and adore and find our joy and our strength and our courage in.

It might be that we are prone to always thinking that we're the wittiest or cleverest person in the room and what we have to say is the thing that everyone should be listening to all the while forgetting that we're like little children in God's kingdom and we should receive that kingdom with open hands and listen and seek to learn and to grow that we might be more like our heavenly king.

[ 25 : 02 ] We might look down on others, perhaps unintentionally. There's lots of little ways that that pride can come out. And the message of this passage is that when we do hang on to our pride and when we don't humble ourselves we are in danger of missing the kingdom of heaven because in that kingdom the king dies a humiliating death as a ransom, a price to be paid.

In that kingdom the greatest is the servant and the one who would be first is what? That most humiliating word slave.

It's not a polished slave it's a rarely down in the heel slave. And in that kingdom those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

And that's really the strap plan one of the strap plans for the entire Bible. And the great the good news for us is that when we do humble ourselves when we give up on being prideful just as Jesus was exalted in his resurrection even though he humbled himself likewise when we humble ourselves we can look forward to that great and glorious final resurrection.

Let me pray for us as we close. Lord we thank you for this passage we thank you for this time we come to you with open hands because we admit what an issue and a struggle this is for us.

[ 26 : 39 ] Please help us to cling on to Jesus as our saviour. Please help us to listen to him more closely and more dearly day by day. Please help us to give him the glory and the honour that he is due in every situation.

In Jesus name. Amen.