

Matthew 20:17-34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 20 verses 17 to 34 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, What do you want?

She said to him, Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your kingdom. Jesus answered, You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?

They said to him, We are able. 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.

And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

[1 : 1 8] It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David.

The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David. And stopping, Jesus called them and said, What do you want me to do for you?

They said to him, Lord, let our eyes be opened. And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.

In Matthew chapter 20, Jesus gives the third prediction of his death. And it's important that Jesus declares his death beforehand. It is not an accident or fate overtaking him unawares.

[2 : 2 7] Jesus predicts in very clear detail what will happen, who will be the participants, and what exactly they will do. Jesus is going up to Jerusalem. He's ascending to the place where he will be condemned and crucified.

He will be condemned by the chief priests and the rulers of the people. He'll be given to the Romans, to the Gentiles, and they will crucify him. They will mock him, and they will scourge him beforehand.

All of these things are predicted in very great detail. When the disciples look back on this, they will see that these events happened according to God's determined plan, and according to Christ's foreknowledge.

Christ knew what he was doing. He did it purposefully. At this point, however, there's a jarring note, as the mother of James and John comes with a request to Christ.

The wife of Zebedee, in stark contrast with everything that Jesus has just taught, asks for a place of honour for her two sons. James and John are present, but their mother makes their case for them.

[3 : 28] It might be worth bearing in mind at this point, their mother is almost certainly Jesus' aunt, and they are his cousins, his first cousins. So this is, in part, a family privilege that's being requested.

They are, of course, two of the three closest disciples, part of that inner group, that follow Christ to places where the other disciples do not go. With Peter, they were on the Mount of Transfiguration.

They have had privileged access in certain respects, and they now want this privileged status. They want these two thrones on either side of Christ, or these honoured places in the banquet, feast of the kingdom.

But they do not know what they're asking. If they want these places, they will need to drink the cup that is placed before them. They will indeed one day do this. But the very way that their request is being made makes clear that they do not understand what it is that they are requesting.

They do not know the path that it requires. Later on, we do see two people, one on the right hand of Christ and the other on the left, but it's found in verse 38 of chapter 27.

[4 : 38] Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. What it means to be on the right and the left of Christ is to suffer with him.

That is the path that must be taken by those who want the honour of the best seats in the kingdom. Now, the disciples will be called to follow that route after their Lord, but at the moment, they're still not clearly understanding this.

They've heard Jesus declaring his death once more, and they've still not got it. They're still thinking in terms of the fervour of messianic expectation that this Davidic king is going to come, he's going to set up his kingdom, and there's going to be a situation in which they're sitting on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel.

Now, while this is clearly part of the picture, there is much more going on that they do not truly appreciate. When the other disciples hear this, they're indignant, but more as those who wanted such honours for themselves than as people who truly opposed the principles that impelled James and John to make the request, Jesus teaches here about the contrast between the characteristic of Gentiles in authority and the form of authority that should be characteristic of his kingdom.

The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over others. They seek to get dominance over others. They seek superiority in status and influence and all these sorts of things. It's a self-serving attempt.

[6 : 06] And it isn't as if there's no honour in the kingdom of Christ. There is honour, but it is not obtained through jockeying for power. Rather, it's found in the way of humility and of service.

Jesus previously taught his disciples by placing a child in their midst and saying that the kingdom of heaven belonged to such persons, that that was the example to imitate.

And here he does the same thing. He has to repeat the lesson because they've clearly not gotten it. Here he teaches that it should not be that way among them, not be the way that it is among the Gentiles.

Rather, whoever wants to be first must be the slave. Whoever wants to be great must be the servant. The way that honour is achieved within the kingdom of God is through service, is through humility, is through not vaunting oneself over others and seeking status over them, not jockeying for power, as James and John were trying to do, but in serving others.

Jesus then gives himself as an example. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. Now, the meaning of this particular expression has been debated.

[7 : 18] Many have seen this as Jesus expressing his humble service, his menial service of his people. But I don't think that's quite what's going on here. What is the service in question?

Are we thinking about Christ assuming a position of a servant relative to a master in a sort of lowly manward service? Or are we thinking about Christ as one who's carrying out a charge, as one who is commissioned as an agent with a ministry, not as one to be surrounded by a retinue of attendants and other people that are serving him as a typical Gentile Lord?

Rather, Christ came to perform the task of the Isianic commissioned servant, the servant of Isaiah, not to get a status for himself.

The focus here then is not straightforwardly upon Christ as a humble servant of man, but upon Christ as one on a mission from his father. Now, he's not gaining status for himself.

He's not pursuing honour in the way that the Gentiles do. He's not pursuing honour through domination. However, nor is the accent upon menial service. Christ is on a commissioned mission from his father.

[8 : 28] He is one who's been sent. He's been commissioned. He's been given a task. He's a go-between. He represents the father as he acts. And so when we read that expression, the son of man came not to be served, the point is not to say the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life of ransom for many.

But the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The point being that Christ did not come to gain dominance as a king, to have people that he could lord it over.

No, he came on a mission from his father. And that mission was to give his life as a ransom for many. Recognising this matters because often we use the concept of servanthood to undermine or to empty out the concept of lordship.

Christ is the Lord, but he is also the servant. Now what does it mean that Christ is the servant, but also the Lord? He is not a lord like the Gentiles, lording it over others, trying to dominate over others and get a retinue of attendance and people doing his bidding.

That's not the sort of lord that Christ is. But Christ is a servant in the sense of one commissioned from his father, as one sent by his father, as one representing the authority and the rule of his father, as one who is faithful to his father.

[9 : 55] And he's also one who acts towards mankind in a way of care and concern. He gives his life as a ransom for many. It's an act of love.

It's an act of humility. And in that way, he's not lording it over people. But in that act of loving concern, he does not become the servant of the people that he is ministering to.

Rather, he is acting in his father's authority as he shows a humble concern for humanity in need. His humble work towards humankind does not make him the servant of humankind in the way that he is the servant of his father.

Rather, he is commissioned and sent by the father and he blesses and he humbly ministers to mankind. In the same way, Christian ministers are not called to just be servants of all in the sense that they exercise no real authority within the life of the church.

Rather, the point is that as ministers of Christ, they should exercise their authority in a way that's characterized by humility, not vaunting it over others, but using that authority to build others up, to take menial positions relative to others, not because they have no authority, not because they have no honor, but because honor in the kingdom is found in faithfully ministering Christ in humility and in self-denial.

[11 : 19] As we better understand this, it will protect us from the trap that many people have fallen into in using concepts like servant leadership, in using one aspect of that to negate the other.

Rather, if we understand servanthood in the way that scripture presents it, where the servant is not merely someone who's performing a menial role, but the servant is someone who's commissioned and sent, who's a representative, who's a go-between, who acts with the authority of someone else.

Now, that is not something that is just menial service. Just because someone can perform menial service doesn't mean that they're apt for this sort of servanthood. What Jesus teaches in such places is not a denial of genuine authority.

Rather, it's the way that true authority should be exercised in the kingdom. Not as vaunting over others, not as lording over others, but as exercising a true authority in a way that is humble and meek, that seeks to build up others and not take advantage over them.

Leaving Jericho, Jesus is followed by a multitude of people, excited by this bold new prophet and teacher and potential Messiah. The blind men call out to him as he's going by as the son of David.

[12 : 35] Son of David, have mercy on us. That request is one that Jesus finally answers. The crowd is trying to shut them up, to ignore them and to pass them by, but they insist and Jesus opens their eyes.

Perhaps we are to see these two characters playing off against James and John. James and John, this pair that do not truly see, the disciples who do not truly understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, what that calling actually entails.

And these two blind men who have their eyes opened, their physical sight drawing attention, perhaps by contrast, with the disciples continuing blindness regarding the true nature of Jesus' mission.

A question to consider. One of the consistent features of the New Testament is what has been called the transvaluation of values or code switching.

The way that terms that have a particular resonance and significance for us are shifted in their meaning. So the poor become rich in the kingdom of God. Or we can think about the ways in which those who are going to be masters or great among people need to become the servants of all.

[13 : 48] There is a reversal of the typical order that we associate with things. Strength can be made perfect in weakness. There is freedom to be found in being slaves of Christ.

If we want to save our lives, we must be prepared to lose them. If we want to be exalted, we must humble ourselves. There is always a danger, however, in using this language of emptying out one term or other of their proper meaning and not exploring the true tension and the true paradox of what is being taught.

What are some concrete ways in the practice of leadership and authority within our communities that we can understand the relationship between leadership and authority and service without emptying one or the other of those terms of their force?

