

## **A Servant is Born**

**Matthew 20:20-28**

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I invite you to take your Bible and turn with me to Matthew's gospel, chapter 20. Would you bow with me as we ask God's blessing on our time together in His Word?

*Holy Spirit, would You please open our eyes, open our hearts, open our lives, that we may behold, that we may treasure, and that we may celebrate wonderful things that You have for us in the Gospel through Your Word today? We ask in Jesus' name, amen.*

Matthew 20, verses 20 through 28:

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up 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. 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."

This is God's holy and inspired Word, inerrant and infallible Word. May He cause us to delight in our being the recipients of His Word today.

## **Gospel Ransom: A Rescue from the Ongoing Power of Sin**

John Paul Getty, Patty Hearst, Charles Lockwood, Walter Kwok, Victory Li - do those names sound familiar? Remember John Paul Getty? He was kidnapped and was ransomed for 3 million dollars. Likewise, a year later, Patty Hearst, kidnapped and then ransomed, this time for 6 million dollars. Charles Lockwood, he had the very unfortunate experience of being kidnapped twice in the space of eighteen months. The first time he was ransomed for 2 million dollars; the second time, 10 million dollars. Walter Kwok, 1977, no, 1997, ransomed for 77 million dollars. Victor Li in 1996, kidnapped and ransomed for 134 million dollars. And then you've probably heard about the King's Ransom, right? This goes back to King Richard in the 12th century, the one they called the Lion Heart. Returning from the third crusade, he was captured and held for ransom. It took about a year to gather up the money to pay the ransom and it was paid - 150,000 francs, rather, marks, which may not seem like a lot of money to you until you realize that 150,000 marks was roughly two and a half times the total revenue of all of England per year. Meaning, adjusting it to today's dollars the ransom paid for the release of King Richard was roughly 3.3 billion dollars.

But all of that pales in comparison to the ransom of Christmas, what we've just celebrated. You find statement after statement in the New Testament declaring why Jesus came. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost." "The Son of Man came to destroy the devil's work." Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly. I have come that you may have joy and that your joy may be full." But here, He makes an absolutely breathtaking statement, one that I'll celebrate not just for the rest of my life but for all of eternity. He says at the very end of our passage, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." I'd like us to slow way down and think about what this means. And to think about it accurately we need to look at the context in which He makes this declaration because the context presents to us a desire, first of all, secondly, a condition, and third, a promise.

And when you see the promise in light of the desire and the condition it will stagger you, what is being offered in this passage, and what you're invited to respond to even today. It doesn't matter who you are; the invitation's going to be the same. What we're talking about when we deal with this ransom is the substitutionary atonement of Christ where He came to take our place and He offered His life as a ransom, not just to rescue us from the penalty of our sin but also to rescue us from the ongoing power that sin still has in your life and in mine so that one day He'll ransom us completely from all the presence of any and all sin. And for that day I long, don't you? It's coming. But for now, we live in that place where we desperately need to be ransomed from the ongoing power that sin still has in our lives.

## I. A Desire

So look with me first of all at the desire expressed in this passage. The mother of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, comes to Jesus, she kneels down before Him, and she asks Him for something. Jesus says, "What is it you want? What is your desire?" literally. And her response deals with seating arrangement, which at first pass you'd think, "I don't get it. Why is she asking for who gets to sit where?" But it makes perfect sense when you go back to the previous chapter, chapter 19 verse 28, when Jesus promises that these disciples who had followed Him would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And this was a promise of honor and authority and power, something that these disciples said, "Yes, we want that!" But when this mother came with this unique request it wasn't to give to her sons what Jesus had already promised them; it was to give them even more honor and authority and power than the other disciples would get because she was saying, "When they sit on those thrones, let my boys sit on the thrones right next to You so that when people look at You they look at them and they say, 'Oh, they're the most special of the special!'" And you might understand that the other disciples would get pretty angry at this and they did become indignant. And yet the way Jesus responds to their anger, at the two disciples, shows us what they're truly after, and actually in the process shows us what we're after and shows us what we need to be ransomed from today.

He says to them, verse 25, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 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." Pause for a moment and think of the two words Jesus uses to talk about what these disciples obviously want - great and first - whoever wants to be great; whoever wants to be first. Now the Greek word that we translate great is "*meegas*," where we get mega. Mega-rich, mega-powerful, mega-beautiful. It's the opposite of being small or inadequate or insignificant or unsuccessful - all these things that we desperately don't want to be. We want to be great. Whether we say it or not, we want things to work well; we want to be in control. We want to have things fit where they belong and say, "Yes, my life is working as I always hoped it would." And in that term, first, "whoever wants to be first," the Greek word we translate as first is "*Protos*, proto," where we get the word, prototype. It's that first one, the pattern after which everyone else follows. It's a way of saying, "Whoever wants to be the one to whom people point and say, 'Gosh I wish I was like her. I wish I could throw a party like she does. I wish I was as successful as he is. I wish I could do it as effortlessly as she has been doing it. I wish my grades were as good as his grades,'" to be the one to whom others point and say, "Man, I wish I were like him."

### Greatness and Servanthood

And suddenly we see ourselves, don't we? Suddenly we see why it is that most

of us, if we're going to be honest, are driven by a desire to demonstrate our worth and to prove ourselves, to win the endorsement of the people around us and say, "Man, attaboy! Gosh I wish I did it like you did! I wish I was like you are!" Jesus says, "Is this what you want? You want to be great? You want to be first? If you want to be great, you must be a servant. If you want to be first, you must be a slave." A servant - one who sets aside his own needs and desires to meet the needs and desires of others. A slave - one who has no rights of his own, who gives up his rights and says, "I'm here to submit to another." Can you do that? Look, if we're going to be honest, we would much rather be in control, much rather have our needs met, much rather be happy, just plain be happy, than fulfill what Jesus says is the requirement for being great and first in His sight, in His kingdom.

## **II. A Condition**

And that's what brings us to the condition. Jesus asks these disciples, "Can you drink the cup that I am to drink? Can you do this?" What is that cup? I suspect it's the same one that Jesus cried out to His Father about in the Garden of Gethsemane when He said, "Father, if there is any way possible, let this cup pass from Me, yet not as I will; Your will be done." Can you drink this cup? You see we go from the desire to the condition. Jesus says, "If you want to be great and first, if you want to prove yourself, you're going to have to be a servant. You're going to have to be a slave; no rights of your own." If we're honest, we're going to say, "I can't do that. I don't want to do that." As a matter of fact, if you look at Jesus' life, the challenge gets even deeper. He says, "If anyone wants to be My disciple, let him deny himself daily, take up his cross, and follow Me."

I once read that there are three fundamental images in the New Testament as you listen to Jesus' teaching that define what discipleship really looks like, that define what taking up the cross and following means. The three images are the yoke, the towel, and the cup.

### **The Yoke of Submission**

The yoke is the yoke of submission. It's what Jesus talks about in Matthew 11 when He says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light," and yet it's still a yoke. It's a yoke of submission where we set aside our rights, our right to be in charge, our right to control, and say, "Not as I will; Your will be done."

### **The Towel of Service**

The towel, that's the towel of service. It's what Jesus took upon Himself in John

13 when Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands and that He had come from God and was going back to God, He rose from supper, He laid aside His outer garments, taking a towel and tied it around His waist, and then He poured water in a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him.

### **The Cup of Suffering**

The yoke - submission; the towel of service. Third, the cup, which is the cup of suffering, a willingness to sacrifice and even to suffer. It's what Jesus talks about in this very passage. "Are you willing? Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" I don't want to rush past this because you have to look this hard in the face, don't you? You know the call to discipleship is the call to take up the cross, to take on the yoke, the towel, and the cup, and to say, "Yes, Lord."

If you're like me, you're going to recoil from that and you're going to cross your arms and say, "I just don't know. I really just want to be happy. I would much prefer to be in control. I would much rather others meet my needs than set aside my rights to meet the needs of others." Which is what makes the message of Christmas such a great treasure, because when Jesus comes to us and says, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many," it is precisely here that the ransom is applied. Yes, it is applied to pay the debt and to resolve the condemnation that stood against me because of my sin, to remove from me the alienation, the barrier that kept me from drawing near to God - that part has been dealt with. All of my sin has been paid for. I have been ransomed from that. But here today is where the ransom is still being applied. And this is how it works - Jesus says to us, "I did not come to get you to serve Me. I came to serve you."

### **III. A Promise**

Now before you recoil from that and say, "That just doesn't sound right," you have to go back to the text and read it. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Look, it comes to this. Christian discipleship, your life as a follower of Jesus Christ, is going to come down to this one thing - are you willing to learn to let Jesus serve you? In every place where you hear the calling of Jesus to take up your cross, to take up the towel, the yoke, the cup, and you think, "I can't do that! I just can't do that!" you're being given a new invitation to let Jesus serve you, to do what is otherwise absolutely impossible for you to do by yourself. You see, the Gospel is not just a message of learning from Jesus and following His example; it's so much more! The Gospel is a message that declares that Jesus has come to ransom us and to apply that ransom in an ongoing way by serving us, by enabling us to be whom we could otherwise never be on our own, by enabling us and motivating us to do what we could never do on our own.

## **Two Kinds of Service**

Think about this. There are really two kinds of service. One is the kind of servant who submits his will to another and responds to the orders of another. That's not the kind of servant that Jesus offers to be for us here. Think, *Downton Abbey* - you have a whole household of servants who quickly jump to their feet and respond to the will of the master. That's not the kind of servant Jesus is to us.

The other kind of servant is one who supplies the resource and the power and the motivation to do what otherwise could never be done. I thought about this a lot this week and the best illustration I could come up with was that of a deep sea diver, you know the old kind that has the big heavy metal helmet and the heavy boots. And he's being sent into a foreign, hostile environment, one that cannot sustain life, and he's sent on a mission and yet his whole life, his whole capacity to fulfill that mission is dependent on the one who serves him on the surface - the dive master, who ensures the right mixture and volume of oxygen delivered to him at the right time, the right place; who secures the tether that keeps him connected to his only source of life and success. The one who communicates with him, the one who gives instructions, the one who says, "It is now time to get out." The one who serves is at the surface. The one down beneath is the one who cannot survive unless he's served and allows himself to be served by the one at the surface.

This is the kind of servant that Jesus declares He has come to be for us. What this means is this - every time you find yourself in a place where you hear the calling of Jesus and He sends you to a place and you say, "I can't do that! This is impossible!" or you say, "I'm afraid!" or "I'm going to be all alone doing this!" or "This can't possibly work out well. Why would God ask me to do this?" every time it happens and you say, "I can't do this," right there the Lord Jesus is inviting you to let Him serve you, to let Him prove Himself to you afresh, to fill you with wonder that, "He did it again. He showed up. He came through. He provided. He sustained. He supported. He did for me what I could never do for myself to His eternal praise and glory." Isn't that what a Redeemer does, over and over and over again? And if you embrace this, and I pray that you will, but if you do, you'll begin to understand a freedom such as you may never before known, because in this context, in this dynamic, it is not we who prove ourselves; it's He who proves Himself over and over again. And then the hymn we've sung over and over again gains new meaning - "Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him! How I've proved Him over and over! Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus, O for grace to trust Him more!"

## **Enlisting the Aid of the Savior**

Isn't this what you most need? You're going to find yourself in places in this New Year where you look around and you say, "I have no idea how this is going to work out. I don't think I can do this. This is impossible." And Jesus will smile and

He will look at you and say, "But the ransom's been paid and I have come not to be served but to serve you in this place, this very place, to enable you to be what you could never be on your own and to equip you to do what you could never do on your own." Then you're off the hook. You get to be like a child who says, "Daddy, here I am. Would you please serve me?"

I remember the knock at my door in my office. The door swung open and in walked a six year old little boy. It was my son, Daniel. And he plopped down in his seat and said, "How's it going, dad?" And we talked for a little while. And he said, "Dad, would you give me five dollars?" And I said, "What do you need five dollars for?" And he said, "I can't tell you. It's a surprise." Well that intrigued me so I said, "Here you go!" And he took the five dollars and began to walk out of my office and said, "Well if it's not too much to ask, would you drive me to the store?" I said, "Why sure! Now you really have me interested!" So we hopped in my truck, drove to the store, and he said, "Dad, you don't have to come in with me. Just wait here by the door." And I did. He brought it in, came out carrying a plastic bag with him, plopped down on the seat, buckled himself in, and he looked at me and smiled and said, "Surprise! I bought you a present!" And I looked inside and there was my favorite, a bottle of Coke and a bag of peanuts, because Daniel knows I love drinking my Coke with peanuts fizzing on the inside!

Here's a question. Did the fact that I provided the money and the transportation for him to give me his gift diminish the value of what he did? Of course not. I was honored to participate in his desire to bring a smile to his father. Does the fact that we invite Jesus to serve us in the places where we cannot make it on our own, does that diminish His delight in us? Absolutely not. As a matter of fact, He is honored, glorified, He rises to show His compassion, He delights to serve His people. Look, He doesn't need our service. Paul says it this way in Romans 11 - "Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory, forever and ever!" God doesn't need our service. He came, He came, to be the one to serve us, not to submit to our will or our authority but to empower us to be and to do what we could never do on our own. And we'll praise Him for all eternity because the ransom has been paid and every day of our lives a full and final payment of that ransom is being applied as we invite Him to serve us.

### **An Invitation to be Served by the Lord**

That's the invitation that stands before you today. Will you be like the stubborn child who says, "I can do it by myself!" And you know they can't. Or will you be like the children that Jesus invites us to be when He says, "Unless you become My children you cannot enter My kingdom"? Children who say, "Lord Jesus, would You please serve me? I can't do this, but You promised You would. So here's my hand. Let's do this together. Would that be okay?" The invitation to you is the same. It's simply to say, "Yes, Lord. Here I am. You know me better than I

know myself. You know how hard I want to prove myself. You know how desperately I want the endorsement and the approval of the people whose opinions matter to me. Yet Father, You can't possibly love me more than You already do. I have Your approval. I'm free! So would You prove Yourself again? Would You smile at me in the process?" That's the invitation before you today and every day this New Year so that we together can walk with the Lord and hear His smile, hear His joy as He smiles upon us and delights in His children, rejoices over us with singing.

Let's pray together.

*Father, thank You for the arms that embrace us, for the everlasting arms that are underneath us and all around us. Thank You that You delight in Your children, that You delight in our coming to You with empty hands, trusting You to fill us and equip us and empower us, to make us to know Your joy and Your delight. Make us to be like children, not as those who are wise in our own eyes, desperately seeking to earn something from You or to enlist the endorsement of the people around us. Make us to be satisfied, truly and eternally satisfied that we have Your pleasure upon us all because the ransom has been paid and because Jesus ever lives to serve us, for the praise of His glory, forever and ever. Amen.*

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