

# A KINGDOM OF SERVANTS

*Matthew 20:20-28*

**20** Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. **21** 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.” **22** But Jesus answered and said, “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.” **23** 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.” **24** And hearing this, the ten became indignant 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 their great men exercise authority over them. **26** “It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, **27** and whoever wishes to be first among you shall 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.”  
(**Matthew 20:20–28, 2022 LSB**)

## THE REQUEST

*Matthew 20:20-21*

**20** Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. **21** 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.” (**Matthew 20:20–21, 2022 LSB**)

We get to meet the mother of James and John in these verses. Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40, Mark 16:1, and John 19:25 tell us that her name was probably Salome, and she was probably the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. That would make her Jesus’ aunt, and James and John His cousins. I’m not going to take time to examine those verses right now, but you can

certainly do that later.

She wants Jesus to give her boys a field promotion so that they would sit on either side of Jesus in His Kingdom. These were typically places that were given to the second and third highest officials in a kingdom, so it was not a small thing that she was asking.

**Are there such positions in the Kingdom of God?** You know, the Bible is frustratingly silent on the eternal state, but I don't believe that there will be any political entities apart from the Kingdom of God ruled by Christ. The word "nations" in Scripture is not a reference to political entities as we know them today but to ethnicities. What we know as political nations – like the United States or North Korea – are called "kingdoms" in Scripture. One thing we do know about the eternal state is that there will only be one Kingdom: the Kingdom of God. Again, we know so very little, but I don't think that the hierarchies of our current world will apply to the Kingdom of God. I think there will be a very basic and simple organizational chart, with God at the top, and everyone else beneath. Whatever positions of honor exist will not be for the leadership of practical leadership but as rewards for faithfulness.

Regardless of the request itself, we can certainly see the faith of this woman. She believed there was a Kingdom to come. She believed that Jesus would be King. She was right about both of these facts. There is a Kingdom coming. Jesus is now King, and will one day be enthroned for all to see. He already bears all authority in heaven and on earth. The Kingdom to come will not exist in full on this earth, although the millennial Kingdom will be a remarkable form of it. But in the eternal state, the Kingdom of God will be fully and perfectly in place. Eternal life will not be eternal existence in a dream, a sort of ambiguous, floating, pleasant nothingness. Those who are in Christ will exist eternally in a true Kingdom, the nature of which is barely described in Scripture and which we cannot begin to understand.

So Jesus doesn't mock her request or their desire, misplaced as it was. They assumed that the Kingdom of God would be largely comparable to every other earthly kingdom. It will be

infinitely more, but they couldn't know that then. But it's not possible to grant their request; why?

## ARE YOU ABLE?

*Matthew 20:22*

**22** But Jesus answered and said, “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.” (**Matthew 20:22, 2022 LSB**)

Jesus immediately addresses their ignorance. They have no idea what they are asking for. It's not the first time that the Zebedee brothers have pushed the limits. On one occasion, a Samaritan village refused to allow Jesus and His disciples to rest there because they were passing through to worship at Jerusalem. James and John offered to call down fire from heaven to consume them (Luke 19:54), only to be rebuked by the Lord Jesus.

Here Jesus points to His crucifixion: “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” Jesus' crucifixion would be the evidence of His divinity and Lordship. He would suffer on the cross for all the sins of His people, completely satisfying the wrath of God. He would then be raised from the dead on the third day, which marked Him clearly as the Lord (Romans 1:4). That is, He Himself would earn the throne upon which He would sit. Could they earn the places on His right and His left? “Are you able?”

“We are able,” they said.

**18** Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling. (**Proverbs 16:18, 2022 LSB**)

Human pride is the most corrosive substance in the universe, leading to every kind of sin. Peter is well known for promising and then failing to never betray Jesus. What we might not

remember is that the other disciples said the same thing (Matthew 26:35).

**23** 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.”  
**(Matthew 20:23, 2022 LSB)**

James and John would face intense suffering for Jesus’ sake. James would be the first of the apostles to die, martyred for the faith by Herod a few years later. John would be the last of the apostles to die, apparently from old age at the end of the first century.

But granting positions of honor in the Kingdom is a right that belongs solely to the Father. He would protect the dignity of the Son of God, and appoint Him worthy companions.

This might have been a disappointing answer to James and John, but at least they got their request in early, right? Wouldn’t the others have done the same?

Well, yes they would have, and they were very angry that they didn’t think of it first.

## JEALOUS ANGER

**24** And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. **(Matthew 20:24, 2022 LSB)**

They were angry at what they perceived as an injustice. Now, it could be that they were all as humble as could be, and were angry that James and John were so off the mark. But I think it’s more likely that they were angry that James and John were trying to protect their own future and gain an advantage that THEY thought THEY should have had. Why do I think that? Because of Jesus’ response to all twelve.

Before we look at His answer, I want to address their attitude. The world functions according to looking out for self. That becomes more and more true as time goes on. The current fads of our time – homosexuality, transgenderism, grooming children for sexual deviancy, insisting that one ethnic group is made up entirely of innocent victims and another ethnic group is rotten to the core, is all based on the same inherent self-centeredness that Satan displayed from the very beginning. Isaiah 14:12-14 tells us that the angel Lucifer decided to “identity” as God: “I will make myself like the Most High.” Men who pretend to be women, and women who pretend to be men, are mimicking the devil himself.

The desire to gain a position of power or privilege is often wrong from the start. We see it in the ten. They don’t admire James and John for getting their request in early; they are angry and jealous. So let’s remember what they forgot: God removes kings and establishes kings (Daniel 2:21). Unless Yahweh builds the house, they labor in vain who build it (Psalm 127:1). Work for what you believe is right, but rest in faith that God’s will shall prevail.

## A KINGDOM OF SLAVES

*Matthew 20:25-28*

**25** 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. **26** It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant [*diakonos*, from which we get *deacon*; a table server], **27** and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave [*doulos*, which refers to a slave, not a hired servant]; **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.” (**Matthew 20:25–28, 2022 LSB**)

Where did they get the idea that the Kingdom of God is about power and privilege? From the Gentiles, of course. That wasn’t a new thing.

In spite of the fact that God wanted His people to take their lead from Him and His Word,

Israel had always been sharply jealous of the nations around them. That's why they were so quick to adopt their practices, in spite of God's stern warnings to reject those practices. Ultimately, they were taken captive to Babylon and were never again a sovereign nation. They were captured by the Babylonians. Then they were under the thumbs of the Medes and Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans.

Every one of those kingdoms, just like every other earthly kingdom, was built and maintained by the forceful exercise of power and control. The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them just as a master rules over a slave. The Herods were relatively faithful to the Roman emperors for a single reason: they were afraid of them. For all the power held by the emperors, they could be – and some of them were – forcefully removed by the Praetorian Guard, which served to protect not the emperor himself but the empire. Human power is, simply put, always at the point of a gun.

But the Kingdom of God functions on a different basis. In a sense, it's topsy-turvy. The greatest in the Kingdom of God is the one who is the slave of all. Of course, that's Jesus Himself: “the Son of Man did not come to be served,” as a typical king would expect, “but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Jesus “emptied Himself by taking the form of a slave, by being made in the likeness of men.” (Philippians 2:7). Do you see the suggestion that to be a human being is to be a slave of God? Taking the form of a slave is equivalent to being made in the likeness of men. It is true that we were created to have dominion over the earth, but we were also created as slaves of the Most High God.

The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of slaves that is ruled by the One who made Himself the slave of all. True leadership in the Kingdom of God is humble, and the great ones of the Kingdom are those who serve the King.

## **THE SLAVE KING**

You know, there is no truth that we can't twist into something self-serving. I've known people in churches who assumed that they have the right to be served and that it's the job of others – especially the pastor and elders – to do the serving. They twist the Scriptures into creating a consumer mindset about the church. Not too many years ago, a man looked me in the eye and told me that my job is to make people happy.

We are also very sensitive to word choice, aren't we? It is no longer acceptable to refer to a “master bedroom” or when dealing with electronics, “master” and “slave” units.

Well, Jesus not only used the word “servant” and “slave” of Himself and His people, He used the word “service” to describe His own purpose:

**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.” (Matthew 20:28, 2022 LSB)**

Just as Jesus Christ is both God and Man, so also He is both King and Slave.

Jesus did come to serve, but that service was defined by God, not by people. When people tried to define Jesus' service, it always quickly degenerated into something cheap and self-serving. In Luke 12:13, we read that someone said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Jesus refused. In John 6, the people wanted to make Jesus king by force. He refused. In Matthew 8, we meet a couple of men who wanted to follow Jesus but on their own terms. He refused them.

That little phrase “to give His life a ransom for many” clarifies that while people are the beneficiaries of Jesus' service, God is the only one who gets to define His service. Jesus is the Word, and God is the lexicographer who defines the Word. We don't get to redefine Jesus according to our own desires or control His hands as He works.

# BRINGING IT HOME

Christians are not called to be servants, as though we have a choice in our vocation. We ARE servants by design. Being transformed into the image of Christ means being increasingly made a servant of God.

There is no question that each of us has needs, and we are not required to apologize for having those needs. But we are called to build up one another and serve one another in love, with our aim being to please the Lord Jesus as our Savior and Lord. A slave is not greater than his master, Jesus said (John 13:16). If the Master Himself was a slave, then how much more are HIS slaves to be slaves?

I can tell you that the more we embrace this truth, the more content we are in our circumstances and in our fellowship. In the four churches I've served in thirty years, not one person has ever left saying, "There just aren't opportunities to serve here," but many have left because the church didn't satisfy their desires or meet their expectations. "The Son of Man did not come to be served" is the same as "the Son of Man did not come to be a customer" or "the Son of Man did not come to be a consumer."

James and John wanted a place of honor in the Kingdom, and Jesus tells them how to achieve it. Be a servant. He says the same thing to you and me today. Don't ask, "How can I get more?" Ask, "How can I give more?" Don't ask, "How can I get my needs met?" Ask, "What needs of others can I meet?"

Let's listen to Colossians 3:23-24:

**23** Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, **24** knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. Serve the Lord Christ. (**Colossians 3:23–24, 2022 LSB**)



Let's pray.