

## KINGDOM VIP'S MATTHEW 20:20-28

In the context leading up to the passage we will be looking at today, Jesus was addressing a particular kingdom value that stands in sharp contrast to self-interest and self-promotion, two of the predominant values in this present world. He said, for example, that in the kingdom of God many who are first will be last, and the last first. In other words, those who are considered nobodies in this present world, might well be the VIPs in the world to come. Or, to say it another way, the VIPs of the new heaven and new earth will not be those who pursued the way of upward mobility in this life, but those who pursued the way of downward mobility—sacrificial love and humble service.

The disciples were part of the audience when Jesus was talking about these things, but apparently the truth of His words was not sinking in, for we read in **verse 20-21**. <sup>20</sup> *Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to Him with her sons and kneeling before Him she asked Him for something.* <sup>21</sup> *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."*

In Mark's version of this story, there is no mention of James' and John's mother, only that the two brothers came to Jesus with the request. Which suggests that James and John *may* have put their mother up to this, especially because, in verse 22, Jesus addresses *them* as though this was their idea. By the way, many Bible scholars believe that their mother was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus, which might explain why she would be willing to make such a bold request.

In the ancient world, there was significance in the assigned seating arrangement in the room where the king conducted His business. The closer one sat to the king, the more prominent His position and role, and the seats on either side of the king were reserved for the most trusted, most respected, and most important persons in the kingdom besides the king himself. When the mother of the Zebedee boys asked that Jesus reserve these two seats, one on His right and the other on His left, she was requesting the two places of highest honor.

It is a request that reveals a number of things, not the least of which is that she and her sons were under the impression that Jesus was about to establish an earthly, political kingdom with a brick-and-mortar headquarters. Remember, they were going up to Jerusalem at this time, and they may well have been anticipating that Jesus' arrival in the royal city might be the time when Jesus would "pull the trigger" and start His reign.

But this request also reveals their complete failure to understand the essential thrust of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom and its values. And it prompted Jesus to say, **verses 22a**, <sup>22</sup> *"You do not know what you are asking"*

The "you" is plural, here, indicating that Jesus was addressing His comment and question not only to this mother, but to James and John. He is telling them that they have not yet understood what He has been saying about the kingdom. They are viewing the kingdom and their participation in it from a self-centered, self-serving perspective—two values that are contradictory to kingdom values. Granted, they had heard Jesus say a few days earlier that in the new age the disciples would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. But apparently, as they pondered that prestigious honor, they were not content with having the same status as the other ten disciples. They wanted greater preeminence.

By saying, “You do not know what you are asking,” Jesus is essentially telling them, “You still don’t get it, do you? Besides your pride and presumption, your question proves your ignorance. Asking for positions of honor in my kingdom is an indication that you have not yet grasped what the kingdom is all about.”

So, Jesus probes their understanding with a question of His own. *“Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?”*

In the Old Testament *“the cup”* is a common metaphor for suffering, especially suffering caused by the wrath of God (e.g., Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15–16). Furthermore, all four Gospels use the term when they are recording what Jesus said of His sufferings in Gethsemane and at the time of His arrest (26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 18:11). Jesus was asking James and John if they are prepared to suffer for their faith, and it is apparent that they understood what He meant.

It is not so apparent why the sons of Zebedee were so ready to express their willingness and their capacity to endure it, for, **verse 22b**, *“They said to Jesus, “we are able.”* Without hesitation and without seeking clarification of what the *cup* involved, they both affirm that they *are*, indeed, able to drink the cup.

Jesus responds, **verse 23a**. <sup>23</sup> *“You will drink my cup...”* You will, indeed, suffer because of me. Jesus already knew that in just a few days they would run away in fear when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, an indication that they were actually unprepared and unwilling to drink the cup. But He also knew that after His resurrection and after they were transformed and empowered by the Holy Spirit James would be the first disciple martyred for Him (Acts 12:1-2) and John would live in exile for many years on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9).

Jesus goes on to directly answer their original question. Look at **verse 23b**, *“...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.”* It is not only the prerogative of the Father to assign people their places in the kingdom; but those places have already *been prepared* for certain individuals. Apparently, the Father has already determined who is going to sit where in the kingdom, which means Jesus could not now give those seats to others.

Matthew now turns his attention to the reaction of the other disciples who had been present during this conversation and had heard this audacious request. **Verse 24**, <sup>24</sup> *And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.*

Predictably, James’ and John’s request, in their presence no less, to elevate their personal status in the kingdom above them did not set well with the other disciples. They *were indignant*. That means they were disgusted, probably because each of them wanted one of those prominent positions in the royal court themselves. James and John had verbalized what they themselves were likely thinking but were too polite or too modest to say it out loud. To make matters worse, James and John had included their mother, Jesus’ aunt, in the scheme, which seemed to them like a calculated, cold-hearted political maneuver.

**Verse 25**, <sup>25</sup> *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.*

Jesus disapproved of the indignation of the ten just as much as the pride and presumption of the two brothers, and thus He calls all of them together to remind them, once again, what kingdom values look like, and that kingdom values are often the opposite of worldly values. In an earthly kingdom, rulers assert their influence and enforce their will through domination and brute strength. It is leadership by forced subjugation—subjugation that is often harsh and repressive. The disciples had seen this kind of leadership first-hand

under Roman occupation.

But that is not the way of the kingdom of heaven, and therefore it is not the way of Jesus' followers. In the kingdom of heaven, it is leadership by voluntary subjugation. Not the subjugation of others, but the subjugation of the leaders themselves who serve the people over whom they have authority. In other words, it is servant leadership. Look at **verses 26-27**. <sup>26</sup> *"It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,* <sup>27</sup> *and whoever would be first among you must be your slave..."*

I assure you, of all the radical things the disciples had heard Jesus say, this might have topped the list. Greatness associated with being a servant? Preeminence achieved by becoming a slave? Talk about upside-down! This sounded preposterous to the disciples! They had seen enough servants and slaves to know it was the last position any reasonable person would desire or aspire to be. There was no one lower than a slave. There was no position that was less esteemed and more disdained than a slave.

So, what did Jesus mean? Keep in mind, He is using the terms *servant* and *slave* as metaphors. He is not suggesting that His followers literally forsake their vocations and positions and become servants and slaves. He is, rather, identifying a certain quality about servanthood and slavery that is commendable and admirable in the kingdom.

What is it? We know that in the ancient world a slave had no rights, no influence, no choices, and no control in any matter. But that *cannot* be what Jesus meant, for He goes on in **verse 28** to say, <sup>28</sup> *even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve..."* Jesus, the sovereign God of the universe, the King of kings and Lord of lords, was a servant!

The quality about slavery that Jesus is commending does not have to do with the identity of a slave, but the role of a slave. What is it about the role of a slave that is commendable and admirable in the kingdom? It is the fact that servants and slaves are all about others. They live, not to promote themselves, but to promote the welfare of others.

Look at the rest of verse 28. <sup>28</sup> *even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."* That is a statement full of rich, theological implications, but it is first and foremost a statement that tells us what greatness means in the kingdom of heaven. Greatness is about living for others. And Jesus, who is the greatest of all, not only lived for others by serving them; He lived for others by dying for them. He made the ultimate sacrifice and paid the ultimate price.

So, the kingdom value Jesus is talking about here that stands in stark contrast to the earthly values is not primarily humility. That is the value He was describing on an earlier occasion when He said, *"Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt.18:2). But on this occasion, in response to James and John's request for self-promotion and self-glory, Jesus is talking about *love*.

And here is how I know this to be true: Turn to John 13. **Verse 1**. *It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love.*

So, Jesus is about to show the disciples what real love looks like. **Verses 2-5**. <sup>2</sup> *The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus.* <sup>3</sup> *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God;* <sup>4</sup> *so He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist.* <sup>5</sup> *After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around Him.*

It is important, I believe, to understand what Jesus did here in the context of His identity. This was the eternal Son of God. This was the One whose wisdom is so great and whose power is so awesome that when He decided to bring planets, galaxies, and constellations into being He merely spoke a word and it was so. This is the One who possesses absolute sovereignty—who controls all things and sustains all things and has authority over all things. This is One who was accustomed to the splendor and majesty of heaven; One whose nature is so glorious that when He was in heaven angels could not take their eyes off of Him. And here He is, assuming the role of a slave, washing two-dozen filthy feet—taking each of those feet in His hands and pouring water on them and gently rubbing off dirt, sweat, grime, and stink, and drying them with a towel.

You should know that although foot washing was a common practice in this day, it was a degrading task that was considered so menial that Jewish slaves were exempt and the job kept for Gentile slaves. On rare occasions when it was done by a wife for her husband, a child for his/her parent, or a pupil for his teacher, it was always an act of extreme devotion. But since it was an act with social implications there is no record of those with “higher” status washing the feet of those beneath them...until now.

I love how Eugene Peterson translates this in *The Message*: “Jesus knew that the Father had put Him in complete charge of everything, that He came from God and was on His way back to God. So, He got up from the supper table, took off His robe, and put on an apron.”

Did you notice the irony? Jesus, knowing He was in charge of everything, put on an apron, and began to wash the disciples’ feet. He didn’t try to prove to everyone how great He was. *He* knew that He was in charge of everything, and whether or not people recognized it at that time was of no consequence to Him. He didn’t demand that everyone serve Him, as though His ego needed to be massaged. He knew that *He* was in charge of everything, therefore He began to serve others, to meet their needs, to elevate them.

Again, that service, that willingness to humble Himself and do the most menial tasks in order to meet the needs of others, demonstrated the depth of His love, and all the more on this particular occasion when He had so much on His mind. Jesus was fully aware that in just a few hours He would be arrested and beaten and mocked and crucified. Jesus was fully aware that most of those for whom He was doing this act of service would abandon Him, deny Him, and that one would even betray Him. Yet He did it nonetheless, because He loved them so much.

But He is also providing an example of how He wanted them to relate to each other. He is modeling sacrificial, self-effacing love. Look at **verses 12-17**. <sup>12</sup> *When He had finished washing their feet, He put on His clothes and returned to His place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” He asked them.* <sup>13</sup> *“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.* <sup>14</sup> *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.* <sup>15</sup> *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (John 13:12-15).*

Please keep in mind that Jesus is not asking us to serve others out of a sense of duty, or even because we should follow His example. He’s asking us to love others like He loves others, and when we love others like He loves them we *will* serve them. We will *want* to serve them. We cannot help but serve them, even if it means doing unpleasant, menial, difficult, tedious, challenging tasks; even if it means stooping to levels that might be considered “beneath” us. We will do it because we want to promote their well-being. That’s the meaning of love, and that is *true* greatness.

“Dr. Robertson McQuilken was for many years the president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. In about 1980 Dr. McQuilken began to see signs of memory loss in his wife, Muriel. For the next decade he watched as his wife’s career of conference speaking, radio shows, and television began to erode and disappear. In the mid-1980’s she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and her deterioration continued to advance rapidly.

“This situation naturally posed a crisis for Dr. McQuilken. As president of a thriving college and graduate school, how could he meet the needs of both his wife and his job? Many Christian friends encouraged him to give his wife over to professional care (i.e. a nursing home), but he could not bear the thought. As her condition worsened, he made a decision that (in his words) was “a matter of integrity.” He resigned from Columbia to care for his wife full time. “It was a choice between two loves,” he writes. Columbia wisely and compassionately supported his decision and began seeking a replacement.

“The striking thing about Dr. McQuilken’s personal story is its theological underpinnings. For some, he was choosing a task at remarkable social and professional cost. He was throwing away his career. Not so. His decision was grounded in God’s love for him, experienced also through Muriel’s unselfish forty-two-year love for him. This made his service a joy (Burge p.382).” He wrote,

*It is more than keeping promises and being fair. As I watch her brave descent into oblivion, Muriel is the joy of my life. Daily I discern new manifestations of the kind of person she is, the wife I always loved. I also see fresh manifestations of God’s love—the God I long to love more fully” (R. McQuilken, Living by Vows).*

I began this message by telling you that two of the most dominant values in our present world are self-interest and self-promotion. Our default mode is to try to be first, get ahead, be on top, and win at whatever cost. The best-selling books in our culture have titles such as “How to Get the Upper Hand,” “Looking Out for Number One,” “Winning Through Intimidation,” and “How to Get Your Own Way.”

That advice and those techniques may help someone achieve a measure of power and greatness in the world’s eyes, but they will do nothing to gain a person any esteem or status with Jesus. His concept of greatness is altogether different. He said, ***“If you want to be great in God’s kingdom, learn to be the servant of all.”***

It is in humble, lowly service for others motivated by pure love that Christ followers are sailing true north in terms of living out their identity and their calling. They follow a Master who took the form of a servant and lived for others so that others might live forever. That is our mandate, and that is our privilege.

## Kingdom VIP's Matthew 20:20-28

Main Idea: *Greatness in God's kingdom is attained by serving others*

A mother's bold, presumptuous request (20-21)

That her sons have supreme status in the kingdom

That Jesus promise to grant her request

Jesus corrects inaccurate perceptions (22-23)

It is an ignorant request (22a)

It does not consider the "cup" (22b)

The Father alone determines kingdom status (23)

The reaction of the other ten disciples (24)

A counter-cultural kingdom value (25-28)

Contemporary culture: VIP's promote themselves (25)

Kingdom culture: VIP's promote others (26-27)

The meaning of "servant" and "slave"

The kingdom value is LOVE

The King is the ultimate example (28)

Application